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BY

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THE last time I saw her was at the Continental in Saïgon, where Frenchmen listening to the latest music from Paris are able to forget for a moment that sun-weary land of exile. She swept out of the café "like the Queen of Sheba," as the estimable Malardier put it, and into her waiting motorcar. And after she passed, a gentleman, in one of those preposterously large felt hats which Frenchmen persist in wearing even so near the equator, laughed and said: "I wonder how long that will last!"... Perhaps, *Madame la Panthère,* you will accept this inadequate testimonial of my belief in the integrity of your cleverness....

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Where a shaft of sunlight falls, the
shadows seem the darker just
beyond its radiance:

Gloom follows at the heels of those
too vivid to be pure.

CONGAÏ

The Beginning: PORTRAIT OF A FRENCHMAN

SHE stood by the edge of the river, her slender legs and thighs sheathed in rust-brown mud, her sarong rolled about her hips, and a rattan basket held against her side. Behind her, the oozy bank ascended to the jungle which, in the melting heat, seemed to lose form and contour and become a depth of fluid green in which the few native huts floated like bits of cork on green wine. Her body was so nearly the shade of the bank that Justin Batteur, watching from the deck of the passing river boat, wondered, drowsily, if she were not an illusion sprung from the soil.

Father Mehry, leaning on the rail beside him, squinted at the woman, and observed:

"Indo-China standing in the mud and glare." Absently he asked: "What do you think of our native women?"

Batteur's face, taut in the heat, relaxed into a smile; the reflected shimmer gave his eyes a curious effect of blurred and sleepy green.

"Beautiful savages," he pronounced, still smiling.

Father Mehry chuckled. "After a few months you won't call them savages."

Batteur stretched luxuriously, with a play of lithe tendons over his forearms, rippling the faint sheen of yellow hair. He sank into a canvas chair.

"You speak from the broad vantage of one seeking converts," he accused.

"I speak from the broad vantage of one who has seen many Frenchmen take them for their wives."

The younger man smiled. "Wives?"

Father Mehry smiled back at him, wisely. He was a tall, stout man, with a gray beard that was red-streaked as though some of the silver hairs had tarnished. Dressed in that ill-fitting, rusty-looking cassock that trailed the deck, and with his soiled white sun-helmet, he suggested, Batteur thought, a comic old archangel who had grown moldy in the tropics.

"Why not wives?" demanded the priest. "They fulfil the duties of wives—keep house, amuse, give affection, and sometimes children."

Batteur looked sleepy. He was watching the gradually dwindling figure by the bank.

"I had always thought," he observed, languidly interested, "that the cloth made one intolerant."

"Mon Dieu!" exclaimed Father Mehry. "It is the cloth that makes us tolerant! And," he added, a glint of humor in his eyes, "may not a priest be a Frenchman as well as a celibate?"

Batteur laughed. "That sounds paradoxical."

Father Mehry shrugged. "Everything is paradoxical—particularly here. Although French women"—again that glint of humor in his eyes—"do not entirely approve of French men living with congaïes, the Government does not discourage it; it brings us closer to the people. Is not that paradoxical?"

"Quite. . . . Make soldiers of the men; marry the women. Long live France, the protectress! . . . But what of the Church?"

Father Mehry shrugged again. "The Church is wise; what good would it do to draw aside its skirts?"

"And the children of these marriages?"

"They become good Frenchmen."

"Probably," said Batteur. "You should know—although I suspect the girls become good congaïes for future Frenchmen, and the boys—well, whatever half-castes become—disturbers, no doubt."

The priest was an effigy of wisdom, smiling down on the man in the sagging deck chair. "Perhaps, when you have been here longer, you will come to understand Indo-China."

The woman by the bank had become one with the river and the jungle, and the river and the jungle themselves had become one with the pitiless incandescence that sheathed the earth like hot metal. Batteur, his eyes half closed, felt like a great cat, and he wanted to stretch and purr.

"For the good of my books," he murmured, "I hope so."

Batteur dreamed that he was a candle burning in thick ocherous gloom, and he awoke to find himself limp with sweat in the tawny glare that seemed to spring up from the stream.

While he slept his helmet had fallen forward on his face, and he imagined that he must have looked rather ridiculous. To whom? There were only three other white passengers: the priest, a mining-engineer bound for Khone, and the wife of an official at Paksé. They were all folded away in their berths, sleeping through mid-afternoon. The only ones who might have seen him were natives. Cattle, he thought; and reflected that, being a good Frenchman, that was what he should think. But, he realized, that was not what he thought really.

From the very moment he had landed, nearly two months past, he had felt a silent brown mystery rising about him. This intangible element in the atmosphere disconcerted and troubled him. At times he felt up to his throat in a sensual limpidity that flowed imperceptibly out of the tawny people surrounding him. He had expected to find himself in the midst of gay colonial life as a prelude to his voyage into the interior where he intended to study and write. Gay colonial life he had found. But it was an arabesque imposed upon a viscid and swarthy background. It was true

that the Rue de la Paix haunted the Rue Catinat at Saïgon, but it was an anemic harlequin that danced to the cadence of throbbing sunlight and the darker measure of native life. Here in the jungle it was the same. All this green seemed subject to the dominant sepia of the people (a color not so much of the skin as of something under the skin) as though the beauty of plants and trees were simply set there to limn a brown silhouette.

It was strange, he reflected, how an illusion of dark moisture seemed to well up out of the earth and bathe his being; it was not an illusion induced by humidity or dampness but by a force even less tangible.

Of course, he realized, sprawled in the deck chair, it was too hot to be greatly disturbed over a matter so entirely subjective. It was simply that he had to readjust his preconceived opinions. And it was too hot to do that very quickly. The manager of the rest-house at Angkor had said he would find it cooler in upper Cambodia. . . . There was a beautiful savagery about these damned natives, he thought persistently. "Beautiful savage"—that was what he had said to the priest. . . . But as for having one— Women were a physical necessity that became less urgent when one created—anything. Sublimation. His life in Paris had been singularly free of them; for he belonged to that earnest group of younger Frenchmen who so far forgot their traditions as to go clean shaven and live without mistresses, and in consequence brought down

upon themselves the hint of vices less traditional but more eminently sophisticated.

His blood was too thoroughly Latin for his admiration of women to be confined to the esthetic; but he was also too thoroughly provincial immediately to allow himself to do more than regard brown women with technical appreciation. What their natural grace symbolized he felt with disturbing intimacy, but he was too well poised mentally to permit himself more than analytical excursions into the mystery. Often, while in Saïgon, he was startled when the searching equatorial sunlight, touching some woman exquisitely Parisienne, disclosed a golden shadow haunting her throat.

Now he had left the coast behind, with all its implications, and in two days he would reach Stung-Treng, where colonial life was a somber duty instead of diversion with pay.

Batteur sat up and surveyed the stream. There was something epic in the breadth of the Mé-Kong. It flowed luminously out of the blue-hot sky, settling down into thick, flat brown. Numerous craft drifted by, manned by natives who stared at the passing river boat. The swells in its wake rocked their tiny pirogues and then sank into the copper calm; just as, Batteur reflected, that rude phenomenon progress must at times rock their thoughts and pass on into the magnificent placidity of minds not involved by the elaborate pretensions of civilization.

In a small space aft, separated by a railing with a gate, were more natives. Their meal had just been served by a deck-boy. The majority squatted as they ate, knees thrust up almost to breast and balancing by some equilibrium unknown to white men, while chopsticks flashed the food from bowls to eager mouths. Some of those mouths sickened Batteur. The lips were stained dark red with betel juice, the teeth black. How could I love a woman with such a mouth? he thought.

Towards dusk the boat stopped at a village. Standing on the upper deck beside Father Mehry, he watched the unloading.

High steps rose from the floating wharf to the embankment that fronted the river. Beyond that were shops built in a long, low arcade. A few lamps smote the crepuscular air. In the soft light Batteur could see that the whitewash was peeling from the plaster arches, and green mold gave them a soiled, haggard look. They seemed, he thought, as old as the shops of Nineveh; and as wise.

In the road were many native soldiers, suave in khaki and spiked helmets, and barefoot. Moving among them were native civilians with classic profiles; slim men naked to the waist; and tiny women in immense turbans, carrying baskets of food to sell or simply mingling with the crowd. Several Frenchmen stood on the landing, immaculate and red-faced, and all talking at once. Soft words in a strange tongue blurred their harsh syllables. The voice of Father

Mehry, speaking from the deck, mingled with the others. Batteur heard himself being introduced, and he spoke automatically while his gaze rested elsewhere.

There was something husky and inarticulate in the night, in the village itself. The Frenchman felt it—like warm groping fingers. The dead arcades and the young soldiers so alive; the coolies with thighs like stags'; the girls in smoldering colors—bright colors that seemed to become fluid, as sweat made them cleave to warm skin and take on a certain naked life. They were the moods of moving bodies, those colors; and the bodies themselves seemed to flow into a greater mood and poignantly enclose Batteur. For a moment he felt like a palet over which amazing color was splashed.

". . . See you next week! . . ." Father Mehry shouted. ". . . au revoir! . . ." The boat's whistle gave a thick cry. It was like something white and strangled that cried out in Batteur. He lifted his helmet to the Frenchmen who receded with the landing like pale distortions. Father Mehry waved. . . . Batteur felt hot and swarthy.

"Stung-Treng is like that," the priest was saying; "and so are most of the towns along the Mé-Kong."

Batteur had a crazy idea that the night was a woman's throat, tawny-dark under the powdering dusk. A faintly cool breeze shivered against him; he luxuriated in it, vaguely disturbed, as in a half-unwilling embrace.

"Is that so?" he murmured, surprised at his own banality. All alike, he thought uneasily.

Stung-Treng appeared on the bank ahead, a huddle of brown and buff-colored houses peering out of the forest.

Batteur was glad. It had been a sultry, brooding voyage, sweaty with showers that left an illusion of hot flanks in the sensitive air.

A group of natives made a brown sprawl on the shore, and in their midst a white helmet caught the sunlight. As the boat drew nearer, the man wearing the helmet began pushing back the natives. In one hand he held a cane with which he struck the half-naked bodies, shouting in a voice that seemed to melt out in the sunlight and lose its invective by the time it reached the little steamer. Batteur laughed. "It's Malardier," he said aloud; Malardier, his friend.

"Yes, the good Malardier," affirmed Father Mehry, joining him by the rail.

The boat had glided close to the bank now; there was no landing-stage, a plank would be flung between deck and shore. Coolies were plunging into the river, mooring-lines between their teeth. Malardier called out, waving his cane. He was much stouter, Batteur observed, but that was to be expected. A flushed, mustached face looked up from under his helmet, dripping perspiration. His white jacket was open, displaying flabby chest muscles under a moss of black hair.

Around his hips was bound a plaid sarong such as many that Batteur had seen natives wearing. Instead of shoes, the fat man on the bank wore dancing-pumps above which his bare ankles gleamed puffily. Batteur could not help laughing. Malardier, immaculate companion of the boulevards, had become as lush as the jungle. Fecund—that was it. He looked positively fecund. And those slippers, so derisively civilized, added a ridiculous note.

A thick jet of voices spurted up and filled Batteur's ears: Malardier shouting to him to wait, that he was bringing a coolie for his baggage; Father Mehry calling down to two other Frenchmen who had suddenly appeared; the cries of running brown men mingled with the loud creaks of taut hemp as mooring-lines strained.

When the gangplank was secure, Malardier came hurrying aboard, his red face jovial.

"Batteur, my friend!" he panted, seizing the other's hands. "Ah! and you have come with Father Mehry. . . . Your baggage. . . . You are well? . . . Meet Monsieur Desbouillion—agent of the Fluviales—and Monsieur Rival. . . . But come, they will have dinner with us tonight; and Father Mehry, too—eh, my Father? . . . Ah, good Batteur—after four years! My God! . . ."

Batteur emerged from the grease-hot air of the lower deck, where the stilled engines hissed steam and a gush of excited voices clotted the atmosphere,

into the thinner but no less enervating heat that scoured the bank. A muddy path slithered up to a road. Natives stood on either side silent, bare shoulders glistening. Among them were a few women, their slender waists molded firmly beneath tight little jackets and their hips caught by brightly colored sarongs. Some wore flowers in their hair. Batteur, following Malardier up the path, let his gaze blur past them. Nevertheless, he felt something intimate in the humidity. It was like a tryst between himself and an anonymous presence—a tryst half unwilling on his part.

At the top he found himself in a road that looked like white powder in the glare. Beyond were houses smothered in foliage that seemed pinned to the earth with extraordinarily tall palms. A few native soldiers were lounging about. They straightened up as Malardier approached. The latter carelessly returned their salutes with a sweat-moist handkerchief. But for the gleaming emblem on his helmet, Batteur thought, one would never have guessed that he was Commissaire of Stung-Treng.

The heat was like a tyranny inspired, crucifying the shadows on the soil. Warm clots of languor accumulated in Batteur's body and thickened about his muscles. Along the road were familiar signs, utterly exotic in this atmosphere. "Douanes et Régies," "Service Forestier."

"As you suggested," Malardier was saying, mopping the flooded pores of his face, "I have arranged a

house for you on the edge of town where you can be quiet. But for a few days you will stay with me." Then he glanced at the other with sly good nature. "There is one detail I did not attend to in advance. . . . You'll have to choose your own congaï."

Batteur laughed with an effort in the heat; his gaze seemed diffuse.

"Why should I have a woman around the house? She'd be a nuisance when I wanted to work."

Malardier gestured explosively with both hands, waving the wet handkerchief and the cane.

"What? No woman? My God! A man cannot live here without feminine companionship. As to your work . . . well, if it were a Frenchwoman I would agree with you. But a native woman, no. Ah, they are so delicate, so—so submissive! And I have had my eye on one or two little beauties for you. There's one, a phusao from Thakkek, Kam-phion is her name, and she's well trained, for Moran had her for more than a year—before he sent for his wife. Then there's little Thi-Linh, part French. . . . But you must have a congaï. Otherwise how do you expect to know the country?"

In the road behind them was a stealth of bare feet. Glancing around, Batteur saw two coolies following with his baggage. Pulses of light seemed to throb down their bare muscles. They sweated. But they did not appear hot as he and Malardier were hot. There was a certain glorification of the heat in their

rhythmic stride; something persuasive in their lyrical brownness, so fluent with perspiration, and for a moment Batteur felt a swooning submission. Why could not white men flower with such voluptuous bloom in this equatorial region? he wondered. Inevitably must they become like Malardier? Perspiration ran over his mouth, it stung his eyes. Tnere was, he decided suddenly, a certain sensual gratification in being so hot.

It was as if the sunlight, flowing in as the sweat flowed out, unfolded something within.

"Yes, I must know the country," he muttered.

To himself he said: Why should I try to resist? It was, he tried to explain to himself, not a matter of scruples—scruples be damned. For why shouldn't he take a temporary native wife? Other men did it without violating their racial integrity. Was there a fulness of being, earned under this burning sun, that relaxed prejudice and welcomed a blending with darker women? After all, he had no actual prejudices against color; he liked to believe he had no prejudices of any kind. It was part of French tradition to be tolerant; in fact, sometimes Frenchmen carried tolerance to the point of prejudice. No, it was certainly not a matter of scruples, he repeated to himself; rather, of fealty to his work as he saw it. Yet there was a haunting challenge in these natives.

What lay behind the voluptuous calm of these people whom the heat seemed to enrich, even visibly, giving a

lacquer-gloss to the sweat that ran down their bodies?

"Who was it," Malardier resumed, "Baudelaire, who said, 'Be always drunken! With wine, with poetry, or with virtue, as you will. But be drunken!'? Only I pray you, Batteur, as a good Frenchman, not to be drunken with virtue! If you come to Indo-China to know it, then become intoxicated with it—and the surest draught is a woman. . . . The congaï, she is our symbol—the symbol of the ability of the Frenchman to mingle with the natives, whereas the Englishman only conquers them. And this climate demands diversion. With the English, it is whisky-sodas, with us, women. Name of God!" he panted jocularly, "will you forsake tradition?"

Batteur only laughed. He had not sufficient energy to do more, for suddenly he had become merely an undulant motion in the hot air. This surrender to the heat seemed to sling his body like a hammock between the two burning poles of his desire to work and his curiosity to penetrate that dark limpidity that had risen steadily about him since he had arrived in the country.

From behind came the caressing sound of naked feet in the dust.

His thoughts seemed to fall in with them, stealing back to the woman who stood on the bank that afternoon when he and Father Mehry discussed congaïes; and that same sunlight that crucified the shadows upon

the soil seemed to crucify the white radiance of his desire upon that tawny figure.

"Thi-Linh," he heard himself murmuring. "You say there is one, half French, called Thi-Linh?"

Part One: HELMET AND SARONG

HER name was Thi-Linh. But lately she would have preferred Yvonne or Marie. They expressed a certain French elegance she wished to acquire. And why shouldn't she? Pale French blood marched side by side with her dark Annamite blood. Since she was a very small girl she had been studying French—lessons divided between her mother and the Father at the Mission—and now this study was giving flower to a treacherously sweet bloom. She read the French journals from Saïgon, and often she purloined the Parisian fashion sheets wrapped about parcels in Vu-Trong-Khai's shop, with the result that her warm, slender little body yearned for the extravagant feel of a French gown, and in fancy she called herself Yvonne or Marie. Although when Kim Khouan made poetry for her she was content with the name her mother had given her.

"Thi-Linh," he would sing, stroking his guitar, "I am a harpstring shivering at your touch, as the forest shivers at the touch of the wind. . . ."

His rich voice gave a vibrant quality to the name that he could never have put into Yvonne or Marie.

She wondered when his father, who was one of

the wealthiest merchants of Stung-Treng, would make an offer—it was sure to be a liberal offer—and thus seal their betrothal. She was fifteen now, and most of the girls her age were wives already, if not mothers. But Kim Khouan promised it would be soon.

"My father will want me to marry a girl who is pure Annamite," he told her often; "so wait, Thi-Linh, until some time when he is in an excellent humor—you know he has not been well—and then I shall ask. And we shall go to Saïgon, and I shall get a position there." For Kim Khouan also nurtured a secret restlessness.

At such times Thi-Linh felt a little annoyed and wondered if she would not do better to become the congaï of a Frenchman as her mother had done. For fourteen years now her mother had been the second wife of Vu-Trong-Khai. But there were days when little lights swam into her eyes, like twin fireflies, and Thi-Linh had come to understand that on those days she was remembering the white man with whom she had lived in Haiphong, Tourane, and Saïgon, those fabulous cities whither Thi-Linh had journeyed only in fancy. She had seen a photograph of this Frenchman; a dark-bearded man with kindly eyes who her mother said was a doctor. "He was a very handsome man," her mother told her, "a scholar. He not only cured the afflicted, but he wrote books on medicine."

Often she wondered why her mother had married Vu-Trong-Khai after her Frenchman had gone back

to France. But perhaps, she decided, it was because he was kind and would take care of her and her child. Vu-Trong-Khai had been a good stepfather—although he had tried to arrange a marriage between herself and a middle-aged Chinese trader with a big belly.

Once when she was a little girl she had been sitting on the bank as a river boat passed on its long journey to Vien-tiane; and she saw on the deck a slender young woman in a tunic of flowered black tissue over yellow, with diamond earrings in her ears. Thi-Linh admired her air of aloofness toward the other natives on the deck, implied in her very posture. Her face, pale with rice-powder against which her lips were scarlet as a grenadine flower, haunted Thi-Linh. One of the women on the bank made a joking remark to another; she heard the name Theou-lan. Later she told her mother about the bewildering creature on the river boat, mentioning her name.

Her mother nodded. "She is the congaï of Monsieur the Prefect of Police of Vien-tiane," she said.

"I should like to be the congaï of a Prefect of Police," Thi-Linh thought involuntarily; and she thought it many times after that, voluntarily.

That day her mother had drawn her swiftly to her in a sudden glow of affection and whispered mysteriously, "You must never lacquer your teeth, little one, nor chew betel."

Her mother was very beautiful in those days; and her teeth were white. When she went to walk late

afternoons, holding Vu-Trong-Khai's baby astride her hip with one hand and trailing Thi-Linh with the other, she wore a lilac kerchief about her head, and her cai-ao, or coat, was a rich plum color heavy with brocaded designs. Now her mother's cheeks sagged; and her teeth were black and rotten from chewing betel. She rarely went walking; all day she sat on the little platform in the rear of Vu-Trong-Khai's shop, one knee drawn up against her breasts and the other bent and lying motionless. Her coats were dark, and very shabby.

She had given Vu-Trong-Khai two children, both boys, and she also had to take care of the three children that his first wife, now dead, had left.

Sometimes at night her mother would bring out an old guitar and sing in a voice that was a mimicry of her youth. For a reason Thi-Linh could not define she thought her mother looked inexpressibly tragic when she sang. And there was one little song—a French air called "Clair-de-Lune"—that stirred a poignant uneasiness in her breast. But this song seemed to please her mother, for she would sit for a long while and croon it, with those drowsy fireflies in her eyes.

Her mother's sister, who was the wife of a Cambodian, lived in Phnom-Penh, a journey of two or three days down the river. Each year Thi-Linh would go to visit her. She did not like her cousins, for they felt no hesitancy in discussing her white blood in terms

impossible to misinterpret, but she was fond of her aunt; and she loved Phnom-Penh.

It was the Great City. Of course it was not as large as Saïgon, but it was big enough to fill her mind with trembling wonder. The canal crowded with gay little boats, with eyes painted on their prows, the laughing sampaniers! The shops filled with Chinese silks and dresses from France! The streets stealthy with color and life, all flowing about the mysterious flushed walls of the Palace!

The Palace, which she had seen only from the outside, fascinated her. She knew that within were many dancing-women wearing jewels and brocaded sampots. And often she used to sit and stare at the spires that flamed above the wall, dreaming that a genie changed her into a beautiful mauve and scarlet butterfly, and she lighted on one of those spires; whereupon the king, beholding her, commanded his mandarins and guards to fetch this lovely creature, and when they drew her down she had returned to her natural shape, and the king, ravished by her beauty, chose her for his chief concubine and dancer. This dream persisted until someone told her that the joints of the dancers were broken to enable them to perform with greater agility. "I shall have to marry a Frenchman after all," she thought, "perhaps a Prefect of Police."

She saw a great number of Frenchmen in Phnom-Penh. Many of them were fat and red, with long beards; but there were others very young and brown,

and some who looked dazzlingly pale as they rode along in the dusk behind sweating coolies.

Once while making a purchase for her aunt at the magasin she had noticed the glinting blond hairs on the wrist of the young Frenchman who handed her the parcel; and that night the memory of them drew little fires in her thoughts.

On the return from one of her visits to Phnom-Penh she said to her mother: "Aunt says the French are very naughty. Is that true, Mama Thi-Bao?"

"Some Frenchmen are naughty," replied her mother, "but others are very good. It is the same with Annamites."

"But aunt says they have taken our land and our money, and that they make soldiers of our men and bad women of our girls."

"It is true that they have taken much—but the Chinese would have done it if they had not; and I prefer the French. It is true also that they have little reverence for tradition, the French, and their manners are very bad. And yet—" A little glimmer came into her eyes and passed.

Thi-Linh persisted. "Aunt says they marry our women when they have other wives in France."

"The Memorial of Rights grants a man more than one wife—"

"But she says they go away and leave Annamite women," the girl interrupted.

Again that little light passed through her mother's

eyes. "It is true," she said wistfully. "But we cannot understand the strange thoughts and reasons that move Frenchmen. Perhaps we should not try, but simply accept the love they give, great or small, and the gifts, and try to think they have not acted cruelly but only naturally."

Thi-Linh did not quite understand all her mother said, but she was sure she meant for her not to hate Frenchmen. And so on those warm afternoons when a brief twilight ached in the streets and the scent of wild lilacs drifted down like an urge to dream, she allowed herself to think of a slender wrist soft with little golden glints; and to fancy that it belonged to a Prefect of Police.

When she was ten years old civilized erudition touched her definitely for the first time. On this particular morning she was sitting in front of Vu-Trong-Khai's shop, making designs in the dirt with her toe, when Father Mehry, the pleasant-looking priest of the Catholic Mission, came along and rumbled at her jovially in his long beard. Her mother, seeing the Father, emerged smiling.

"Bon jour, Thi-Bao," said this genial-faced priest to her mother. "Was the little one's father French?"

"Oui, mon Père."

"Ah! And shall we make a good Frenchwoman and a Catholic out of her?"

"Oui, mon Père."

"Good! Send her to me at the Mission tomorrow."

Before that, religion had not troubled Thi-Linh greatly. Of course she prayed and burned incense before the tablets of her ancestors; and she had a profound reverence, impressed by fear, for two supernatural beings, one called Sakya-Muni and the other Huyen-Vu. But she had much more actual respect for my Lord the Tiger, who stalked abroad after nightfall, and the Great Mandarin, the elephant, who could rip immense trees from the earth and pound a man to pulp. And, naturally, she avoided all the Ma, or evil genii, that lurked behind trees, in bushes, in fact everywhere; some of whom hurled the thunder and others bred sickness, while the majority simply frightened one at night.

But now religion became complex and often very annoying. For instance, confessing seemed quite silly, for generally when you did naughty things you weren't sorry for them, and to say that you were was simply adding lies to the original transgressions. Also she had to remember new prayers. This seemed useless and a nuisance, for if the priest's genie was as good as the priest said he was, then he would be just as pleased to hear old prayers. Nevertheless, she thought, the priest's genie was rather beautiful, with his sad, thin pallor and tragic eyes. He was carved out of ivory and hung on a great black, silver-studded cross in the priest's pagoda. On the altar at his feet were many dolls, much lovelier than Chinese or Annamite dolls.

But religion was not as difficult as the lessons in

French. Her mother had taught her a little, but that little seemed very small indeed when the priest thrust strange books at her and rumbled words equally barbaric. But gradually she came to like those queer sounds which slipped from her tongue so hesitantly and made familiar things seem new and foreign. When she had learned to speak fairly well she boasted of it to the girl whose father had a shop next to Vu-Trong-Khai.

"Hussy," said the girl scornfully, "you only learn this French tongue so that you can more easily trade your virtue when you are older!"

Whereupon Thi-Linh scratched her face and pulled her hair until she screamed; and then at confession she devoutly declared she was sorry.

Girls did not like Thi-Linh, and she reciprocated. Nor did she like her two little stepbrothers and Vu-Trong-Khai's three children. Being older, she was frankly scornful. Her playmates were Kim Khouan and his friend Thao-Nhi. Kim Khouan—Ong Kim Khouan was his full name—was the son of Ong-Binh-Thai, the wealthy merchant. He did not have a flat nose like many Annamite boys; it was a classic nose, like his Lao mother's. He was a slim boy with skin smooth and brown as sandalwood and shiny black hair that fell irregularly over his eyes; curiously dark eyes with something luminous behind them—like the dart of a fish in night waters. When he grew beyond the age of nakedness he wore black silk trousers that

flopped loosely about his ankles, and on special days added a long tunic of gauzy material and patent-leather sandals whose heavy heels clicked when he walked. He had a strange, slow smile; and sometimes he stuck a flower behind his ear. Thao-Nhi was a Laotian; a muscular little fellow who was a shadow of Kim Khouan.

Kim Khouan lived in a splendid house with a garden where magenta bougainvillea spilled over the walls and lemon-flowers bruised the warm air. In the house was a shrine that boasted a figure of Sakya-Muni, of Huyen-Thien, and the six good genii, and many sacred tablets to his Ancestors. His father had two wives and seven children, six of whom were boys. The family, like the house, was very splendid; and Thi-Linh came to understand that the genie who controlled friendships had been very generous with her.

Kim Khouan studied French at the Mission; he was a convert. Often they used to read aloud from their books while Thao-Nhi sat in silence, listening. But Thao-Nhi remained serenely a Buddhist. Very soon he would go and study with the bonzes—not French but sacred Pali script—and after six months or a year he would come out of the monastery versed in the knowledge of those who sought the Noble Eightfold Way.

The warm dusks came and went over Stung-Treng, while the days kindled tawny fire in the roads; and out of all this mingling of twilight and heat crept

something passionate and subtle that entered into Thi-Linh. At times she was aware of an intensity behind her consciousness, glowing as sunlight glows behind a pale-veined petal. She felt this more when she thought of Kim Khouan. There were moments, talking together or strolling through the forest drowsy with coming night, when she experienced a fluid indolence that made her want to stretch—slowly—luxuriously—until she touched his smooth shoulder or the black hair that hung irregularly over his eyes. Then, she felt, all that golden smoldering would be quenched. Thao-Nhi was in the monastery now; and she was glad. She was fifteen, and her body ripe with a slender maturity.

Often she and Kim Khouan would walk along the mud-red roads beyond the town where bare-hipped women worked in the rice-fields, and water-buffaloes lay nostril-deep in the drench. Or they would sit on the river bank and he would read from the Lac-Van-Tien or the poetry of Nguyen-Du. Being an Annamite of good family, it was part of his inherited culture to know poetry. And for Thi-Linh he translated the beauty of living into words. Behind his soft voice, the warm drowsiness in his eyes, was a restlessness that at times flowed out and touched her electrically. It was at such times, that he talked of Saïgon, of the future.

"Kim Khouan," she said one afternoon when they sat together on the bank of the Sé-Kong, "when we are

married will you give me a tunic of black lace over yellow?"

"Yes."

"And earrings of diamonds?"

"Moonstones would be better—for they are the stones of happiness."

She frowned. "But when will your father ask for me?"

"I shall speak to him soon, Thi-Linh; he is not well, he is irritable, and I must wait until a more propitious time."

"But if you do not hurry, some fat old man will make an excellent offer for me, and Vu-Trong-Khai will force mama to accept. I am not his daughter; he would be glad to be rid of me."

Below their feet, where the Sé-Kong mingled with the reeds, purple irises bared their throats; and she ran her fingers over her own throat involuntarily. It was a movement of appraisal, and she was pleased with the softness, the faint throbbing of her pulse beneath her fingers.

"And what do you think your father will offer? He is a wealthy man. Eight maù of rice-fields—or perhaps ten—and four hundred piastres; and a long necklace of gold beads; and earrings. . . ."

She dreamed voluptuously. Two pirogues out in midstream seemed to drift with the lazy richness of her thoughts.

"And when you come to offer me betel at our be-

trothal, you will wear a fine cai-ao of black brocade—and leather sandals—and you will bring the betel in a box of red lacquer—and your father will come with the servants bearing gifts. . . . Oh, Mama Thi-Bao will be very happy!" She paused to wonder if Mama Thi-Bao *would* be very happy, then quickly skirted the thought. "And we shall have a splendid feast at the wedding," she murmured.

"Banh'u with millet," he drowsed on; "many sirups, and beans, and roast duck—and of course jars of choum-choum." After a pause he added: "And surely we must have eggs for the Ancestors."

"Oh, it will be very splendid indeed!" she cried. "And shall we go to the pagoda or the Mission? I think we would have a larger wedding if we went to the pagoda."

"We must go to the pagoda," Kim Khouan decided. "My father would demand it. But we can go to Father Mehry afterward."

"Yes," she agreed. "That would make it more secure."

Several afternoons later Thi-Linh's mother, sitting on that little platform in the rear of the shop, stirred from her lethargy. "You will go to Phnom-Penh soon, Thi-Linh."

"But why spend so much money this year?" said Thi-Linh very righteously. "It is not necessary."

"You are fifteen now," her mother announced solemnly. Reaching into the box at her side she drew out

a slice of areca, dipped it in lime, and then wrapped it in betel-leaf, placing the whole in her mouth. She chewed a moment before she continued. "I have not allowed you to use betel," she said.

For an instant the vision of a splendorous creature in a tunic of smoky yellow spun before Thi-Linh, then she grasped at the slim, tawny image of Kim Khouan and clung with tottering poise. A glow spread over her with the consciousness of her fealty, uncertain though it was.

"Do you think you would be happy with a Frenchman?" her mother continued.

Another vision smote Thi-Linh, that of an old woman with sunken breasts, seated crooning over a guitar. Why must Frenchmen always leave their women? she demanded of herself with savage vehemence. No, she would never be left to sing little chansons that were faded ghosts of love! "Thi-Linh, I am a harpstring shivering at your touch. . . ." The remembrance of that voice was like a luminous movement in the dusk of her thoughts. She said:

"How can I know if I would be happy with a Frenchman?"

"Some are very pleasant to look upon," murmured her mother. "In Phnom-Penh there is a congaï who makes arrangements between Frenchmen and girls."

Thi-Linh sank beside her mother and kissed her in Annamite fashion, rubbing her nose against hers and sniffing affectionately.

"But wait a while," her voice caressed. "I do not wish to leave you yet, Mama Thi-Bao. Next month I will go to Phnom-Penh."

The older woman lapsed into silence, now and then spitting a jet of blood-red betel-juice. Those misty little fireflies swam in her eyes. Finally she spoke, and very tenderly.

"I have always dreamed that you would be the wife of a Frenchman; I think you would be far happier."

Thi-Linh trailed her fingers across her mother's gnarled hand.

"Yes, yes," she murmured. "I know—my blood." Again her thoughts were drunk with the vision of an exquisitely lovely figure on the deck of a river boat; and again the figure sank into the dark forests of Kim Khouan's eyes. "Next month I will go to Phnom-Penh," she repeated.

2

Kim Khouan went on a visit to Saïgon.

He was away three weeks, and toward the end of his absence Thi-Linh pretended that she was not well so her mother would not bring up the subject of Phnom-Penh. It did not require much pretense, for since Kim Khouan had gone she had been conscious of a desperate emptiness, at times amounting to acute misery, troubling her sleep and excluding the desire for food.

When he returned she noticed a look of sensitive bewilderment in his drowsy eyes. The very afternoon he arrived they went to gather red jasmine in the forest, and when they were alone he suddenly pulled her to him clumsily, and kissed her upon the lips. It was the first time she had been kissed in the French manner; she seemed to go limp with an almost unendurable ecstasy. Kim Khouan looked frightened, and was silent for the rest of the afternoon.

She did not see him for some days following that. When finally he appeared he had a confused, melancholy air. It remained with him, a disturbing shadow that lifted only when he spoke of returning to Saïgon and taking a position in the office of one of his father's friends. Thi-Linh experienced a pain vaguely nauseating whenever he talked of going away.

"There are many lamps on the streets, Thi-Linh," he told her, "lighted by strange wires which the French work. And there are theaters—oh, more than in Phnom-Penh! And there are cafés on the sidewalks where the French sit in white clothes and drink wines! And the women! Such clothes, Thi-Linh! And jewels!"

"Are they more beautiful than Annamite women?" she demanded.

"Yes." Then he caught himself. "But you are not all Annamite." And after a pause he added so swiftly that a flame caught at her throat, "Oh, none are so lovely as you!"

The days brooded caressingly on Thi-Linh, and the nights made carnival in her thoughts. Often in the hushed dark she sang "Clair-de-Lune" to the trembling chords of a guitar, hoping that the Con-Tinh, those siren genii who dance at night, would carry the echoes to Kim Khouan.

At Stung-Treng the Mé-Kong thrusts a bronze arm into the forest—the tributary Sé-Kong. Between these two streams are many little pools sunk in the jungle. The natives say that toward dusk the Ma-da, or water genii, haunt these pools, lying in wait for those indiscreet enough to bathe there.

But Thi-Linh had studied at the Mission. She had been told that the water genii were a myth, and although she did not believe it entirely, this half-assurance gave her the courage to steal away from the town late afternoons and lie dreaming in a lucent green bath.

It was to this pool that she went one afternoon at sunset when the dust was golden on her body; and it was here that Kim Khouan found her, with her slender limbs caught in the silky stems of water-plants, the fireflies careening above her. She did not hear him until he had stepped into the water beside her. Then she sat up quickly, crossing her arms over her breasts.

"You were not afraid?" he murmured in a voice husky-soft, dropping beside her. For a moment they were silent, her heart trembling its intensity. His fin-

gers slipped into the floating dusk of her hair. "Thi-Linh!" he whispered.

All the life of the forest seemed to close about them like a day-blooming flower, holding them close to its silent heart.

"Thi-Linh!" he whispered over and over, a drunken look in his eyes.

"When will you speak with your father?" she asked breathlessly.

"Soon," he murmured, "soon."

Then he had bent and his lips were moving slowly over the dazzling pallor of her throat and shoulders. Kim Khouan had learned a lot in Saïgon.

3

After that there were many trysts at the pool—fragile moments that tangled her thoughts in cobweb.

One afternoon three weeks later she went there just before dusk, the usual hour of meeting. Clouds spumed darkly over the sky, and mosquitoes hummed in the swollen quiet. The water lay motionless except where insects skimmed over the black surface. Thi-Linh felt that vague little creatures were skimming across the surface of her mind. She lay down beside the pool to wait.

When he came he did not drop beside her immediately, but stood looking down at her with a troubled gaze. The mosquitoes twanged viciously.

"Thi-Linh—" he began. Then he sank beside her and kissed her, his lips clinging fiercely. Her fingers browsed over the soft tendons of his throat. The mosquitoes made only a drowsy singing now—as though they had retreated into folds of gauze.

"Thi-Linh," he repeated. "My father—"

"You have spoken?" she whispered.

During the long silence her nerves seemed to vibrate. An insect brushed against her ear with a violent singing.

"My father," she heard him say, "has arranged for my marriage to Keou-Thanh, the daughter of Ly-Binh."

A laugh snapped in her throat. "Kim Khouan!" she cried, raising herself on one elbow. "How can you—"

"It is true," he said quietly.

Suddenly that taut silence seemed to rend and loose those singing insects upon her. Loudly her pulse responded, and she was lost in dusk that hummed and throbbed. The gloomy forests of his eyes dwindled to points that stung her. For a long while she lay there nauseated, her flesh burning. Black rings, yellow-tinged, expanded and contracted before her, each seeming to frame thoughts that pranced into her mind, absurdly inconsequential thoughts. She remembered the greasy cooked fowl hanging in the arches of the Chinese market; the way that certain people walked; how the bar of light thrust out from the doorway of

Vu-Trong-Khai's shop at night. Silly, meaningless things. Behind them and over them lurked a dark agony, intensifying their insignificance.

She stirred, still nauseated, and sat up.

Kim Khouan's eyes besought from the pale blur of his face staring up at her. Tomorrow, she thought, he will put on leather sandals and a coat of black brocade, and carry betel to Keou-Thanh, daughter of Ly-Binh. . . . And suddenly she reached down and sunk her slim nails into his cheek and pressed with all her strength. He did not cry out, or even speak, only continued to stare with dumb pain. She could not endure that look: she sprang up, darting into the midst of the trees and shivering as velvety creatures hurtled against her.

4

Ten days later she came into the shop of Vu-Trong-Khai to find Monsieur Malardier, the fat, red-faced Commissaire of Stung-Treng, talking with her mother. As she entered, the Frenchman looked startled, then smiled and held out his hand. She returned the smile, although the feel of his moist, flabby hand made her want to grimace. He seemed stuffed into his tight-buttoned starched coat.

"Ah, Mademoiselle Thi-Linh! And looking more charming than ever!" Then he added jocularly to her mother, "My God! She is more beautiful every time I see her!"

Thi-Linh experienced an overture of dread. But she continued to smile, and sat down beside her mother, one bare foot stroking the floor with animal flexibility. Although her heart beat swiftly, she knew she looked quite unconcerned.

Monsieur Malardier drew out a package of cigarettes and offered her one. She took it with lazy grace, coolly meeting his eyes as he bent to light it.

"She smokes with the air of a Frenchwoman!" he observed, and Thi-Linh only continued to smile, all the while gazing at her slender fingers. If he asks me to be his congaï, she thought, what shall I say? He is so fat that his eyes bulge. But he could give me a fine silk cai-ao, many of them, and diamond earrings. But sweeter than that was another prospect. Gossip had brought the news that, the moon being propitious, Kim Khouan's marriage-day had been set. If before that time . . . And so she ceased to smile at her fingers and smiled at Monsieur Malardier.

"How old are you, my dear? Sixteen? Or seventeen?" Without waiting for a reply he went on humorously. "Old enough to think of men, eh? And perhaps"—he winked at her—"to want one?"

Thi-Linh pretended that she was embarrassed; she was wondering if she could suffer this huge man who seemed stuffed into his clothes. And if she could—what sweet revenge!

Monsieur Malardier was in excellent spirits. He

chuckled and said: "And how would you like a Frenchman, little one?" Then he laughed and winked at her mother. "Well, au revoir, Thi-Bao. I shall see you tomorrow." He lifted his helmet and made a mock bow to Thi-Linh. "Au revoir, mademoiselle. And may you get a nice Frenchman some day!"

Still chuckling, he went out.

Thi-Linh glanced at her mother searchingly; her temples throbbed, half with excitement and half with distaste.

"What did he want, Mama Thi-Bao?"

The older woman spat a red stream before she answered. "There is a new Frenchman just come to Stung-Treng," she said.

"And he wants me to be his congaï?" Thi-Linh divined breathlessly.

Her mother nodded.

"Have you seen him? What does he look like? What did you tell Monsieur Malardier?"

"The new Frenchman wishes to see you tomorrow."

"What is his name?"

"Monsieur Batteur."

"You do not know what he looks like? Is he young?"

"I have not seen him. But he has made a very generous offer."

Thi-Linh was dreaming swiftly. She pictured various Frenchmen she had seen and fitted their likenesses to this anonymous person. A fire was smoldering in

her, and very soon it would flame up to torture the naked image of Kim Khouan.

"Is it your wish that I marry this Frenchman?" she asked.

"You know I have always desired a French husband for you."

"And what of Vu-Trong-Khai?"

"There will be one less mouth to feed."

A poignant jet filled Thi-Linh's throat. She swallowed it as a tiger-cat would swallow blood.

"And this Frenchman, will he leave me after a while?" she continued.

"Probably," said her mother with a wistful vacancy in her eyes.

Thi-Linh smiled faintly. Banh'u with millet, many sirups like thick rainbows, beans and roast duck; and a great procession, swaying under pale lanterns, carrying a jar of choum-choum to the pagoda. . . . The procession vanished in the blur of an anonymous Frenchman. A dream, she thought bitterly, a silly, childish dream. And this Frenchman: surely he would buy her a coat of black lace tissue over yellow.

5

In the morning Thi-Linh awoke with an excited trembling in her temples.

Very early she went with her mother to the shop of a Chinese merchant and bought a violet-colored kerchief

to wear about her head. "I have no new tunic," she complained to her mother, who replied that it was just as well, for it would not be good to have too many clothes. Thi-Bao removed several gold bracelets from an old chest where she kept a few treasures and slipped them on Thi-Linh's arms, enjoining her to return them when Monsieur Batteur gave her others. Thi-Linh had put on her best cai-ao; it had been a rich plum-color, now it had faded to ashy purple. Her little black trousers peeped from under it with a certain charming impertinence.

She spent some time making her toilet, seated cross-legged before a cracked, fly-specked mirror. Carefully glossing her hair with a sweet pomade, she twisted it into a chignon, then stuck a yellow bloom in it and examined herself critically. That flower made her lips look too pale. She told her mother, who went to the chest again and brought out a piece of red Chinese paper. With this she carmined Thi-Linh's lips. The effect was very pleasing.

Of course, Thi-Linh thought, my kerchief will hide the flower, but he will see it when I take the kerchief off.

Humming to herself, she smoothed rice-powder over her face. "Thi-Linh, I am a harpstring shivering at your touch. . . ." As that darted through her mind she saw a cold little smile in the cracked, fly-specked mirror. I shall leave a crack in his heart like the crack in this looking-glass, she told herself.

Her toilet finished, she stood up and appraised herself from the curve of one lifted foot, arch convex, to the slim erectness of her shoulders. She was no longer a thin shaft of a girl. A rich bloom had come into her figure, expressed in the delicate contours of breasts and hips. Satisfied, she thrust her face close to the mirror and crouched there gazing into her own eyes; wide eyes, tawny-flecked as an intruding quiver of sunlight slanted across her forehead and crashed upon the mirror. Her throat, pale with a golden luster, rose to a face not too sharply oval and a fragile flower of lips. The faintest length of narrowness at the corners of her eyes gave an illusion of sultry brooding together with a quality of exquisite frailty.

When her mother called her, she slipped her feet into wooden sandals and went click-clacking across the hard dirt floor to where Thi-Bao waited in the entrance to the shop.

The house of Monsieur Malardier was near the other end of town, and they followed the long main road which flanked the river. The vertical sunlight made little wasps that stung and left Thi-Linh's body under a film of moisture. She hoped it wouldn't spoil her appearance.

When they reached the gate of the commissaire's house she experienced a little flutter of fright. Pausing, she gathered her courage while she retied her kerchief under her chin, then she followed her mother toward the steps, heart aquiver.

A pleasant sprawl of a man reclined in a cane chair on the veranda, one hand playing with an empty glass and the other holding a sheaf of papers. As Thi-Linh and her mother clattered up the steps he gazed at them with an expression at first surprised and then vaguely ill at ease. The women paused on the top step, and for a moment the three exchanged stares. Then he smiled, and Thi-Linh observed that it was a smile indolent and kindly.

"You are Thi-Linh?"—gaze upon her.

The wild beating of her heart quieted. She lowered her eyes and murmured, "Yes, monsieur."

Her downcast eyes were filled with the fluid drowsiness of his gaze. She heard her mother speaking to the Frenchman, then Monsieur Malardier's voice rumbling out of the house. She looked up to see him emerge wearing a sarong and that stiff white jacket buttoned tight about his torso.

The other Frenchman also wore a sarong, and one leg, crossed over the other, was thrust out from between its folds, lazily balancing a sandal that hung from the tip of his toes. Thi-Linh felt a hot wave pass up through her as she noticed his bare forearm. A door of memory swung open to reveal another forearm covered identically with a sheen of glinting hairs. Immediately there was something familiar and friendly about this Frenchman; and something of fulfilment.

He smiled at her with a half self-conscious, half satirical lift at one corner of his mouth.

"Do you think you would like to be my wife?" he asked, while Monsieur Malardier talked loudly with her mother.

She smiled back at him. "Monsieur is very pleasant to look at," she pronounced in her best French.

He laughed and spoke to Monsieur Malardier. "Both discreet and flattering," he commented. "An admirable combination."

"Did I not tell you she was intelligent as well as pretty?" boomed out the commissaire.

Whereupon Thi-Bao began gravely to recite her daughter's virtues. "And she speaks and reads French," she finished.

Monsieur Batteur had listened with a hint of a smile in his blurred green eyes. "Where did she learn?" he inquired.

"At the Mission, monsieur." Then Thi-Linh's mother added proudly, "I taught her a little when she was very young."

"She is Catholic?"

"Yes, monsieur."

Monsieur Batteur looked neither pleased nor displeased. He merely stirred and stretched, running one hand over his forearm; and Thi-Linh felt something within herself steal out and follow that luxurious gesture.

"Does she know many native legends—and poetry?" the Frenchman interrogated.

"Many," said Thi-Bao. "And she has read the Lac-

Van-Tien—also the verses of Thuy-Kien, and others." She showed her black teeth in a smile. "Monsieur likes poetry?"

"Monsieur is a writer," spoke up Monsieur Malardier. "A distinguished man of letters in France."

Batteur seemed not to hear him; he was gazing at Thi-Linh, and she realized that he was suddenly wondering about her teeth. She could have smiled to show him, but a natural perversity kept her lips together. She was thinking: he will write verses for me. . . . Then a little ghost laughed and murmured: Yes, he will say he is a harpstring shivering at your touch; and then he will leave you. . . .

"Come here, Thi-Linh," commanded Monsieur Batteur.

She approached him with a certain proud humility in her carriage. He gazed at her so fixedly, with such an intense look of quandary in his eyes, that she laughed. Then he smiled—an expression that suggested relaxing muscles.

"Yes, you will do," he decided. Then he went into the house, returning with a box which he held out to her. "A little gift from your affianced," he said ironically.

Thi-Linh wondered if it would be rude to open it now, deciding quickly that it would not.

In the box was a necklace of moonstones. It made her a little dizzy, for it was more beautiful than any she had ever dreamed of possessing. Then, as she

continued to gaze at those softly glowing stones, they seemed to congeal. "They are the stones of happiness. . . ." Brown boy lying on the river-bank, talking of love. With a sensation of almost physical agony she seemed to feel his dark eyes close to hers; and then they grew misty as with cataracts, and multiplied; and now they lay in the little box which she held in her hands.

She heard herself murmur, "Thank you, monsieur."

"And you will come to my house tomorrow," he instructed.

As she walked back to her home, moving in a shimmer of heat, a sudden limpness seized her, and all energy seemed to run out of her into the shadow that swam at her heels. All of her feeling reduced to a shadow, bruise of the sunlight. And when the sun went down, that shadow would evaporate. What would she have left to take Monsieur Batteur tomorrow?

6

For three weeks now Thi-Linh had been in the house of Justin Batteur.

It was not as fine as the commissaire's house. But it would do. There were three rooms, all carpeted with mats and furnished in teakwood; and rattan blinds gave the veranda an illusion of dusk throughout the day. In the great living-room a tiger-skin sprawled across one wall between mounted gaur-horns. Mythological pictures painted on Chinese paper hung on the

other walls—and a few Laotian scarfs. In the doorway between the bedroom and the living-room was a red Annamite banner embroidered with a Tao, the symbol of supreme intelligence, which served as a curtain. To Thi-Linh this seemed a little incongruous, perhaps a bit undignified. But, she realized, there was no accounting for the whims and tastes of Frenchmen. And this Frenchman of hers was extremely eccentric. When she placed the crucifix that Father Mehry had given her on the table in the bedroom, he suggested that she put a Tonkinese incense-burner in front of it because, he explained, he liked the effect.

He was indeed a very strange person, this Justin. (He had told her to call him that.) At first he awed and mystified her; of course she did not let him know that, for instinct warned her it would be unwise. He would lie stretched out on a chaise longue on the veranda for hours, pencil in hand and paper on the table; and then suddenly he would look at her in a queer manner (usually she sat cross-legged on the floor a few feet away, embroidering or merely thinking) and ask the most absurd questions.

Once he said, "Thi-Linh, what sort of soul have you? Won't you show it to me?" And he went on murmuring, "I wonder if souls have colors. . . ." Then he broke into that lazy smile and stretched; she liked to see him stretch, for then the muscles rippled across his sun-flushed jaws and forearms in a way that made her thoughts undulate with them.

She had asked him to tell her what a soul was. She had heard Father Mehry talk of souls, but she did not understand.

"A soul," he said, "is a reason for the body." He laughed at her expression. "You don't understand that? Naturally. Well, a soul——" Suddenly he pointed to a lamp in the house. "See that? When you touch a match to the wick it makes a flame. The same with a candle. The oil goes out of the lamp; the tallow gathers around the foot of the candle; there is no flame. That is death, Thi-Linh. So we get another wick, or another candle, and we touch a light to them. That is birth. They change, these lamps and these candles—but the flame is the same—always. This flame is soul. . . ." He had become interested in what he was saying, and he bent toward her, pupils contracted thoughtfully. "We may have a thousand bodies, Thi-Linh—grotesque or beautiful—shapes of flesh that dry up like the wicks or burn to tallow like the candles—but invariably someone—call him God, Buddha, or Nature—strikes another match."

Another time he had started out of his silent mood to say, almost irritably:

"I wish you wouldn't sit on the floor, Thi-Linh; it isn't dignified."

"But Mama Thi-Bao and all the girls I know sit on the floor." She was not averse to sitting in a chair but she wished to know why she should.

"To the devil with them!" he replied. For a moment

she thought he was going to be angry, then, swiftly, he smiled. "But no—sit on the floor. You are Annamite—do not change. You must not let me try to make you into a Frenchwoman."

Nevertheless, the next day while he was folded in thought she slipped into a chair and waited with a smile of satisfaction. When finally he became aware of her he frowned.

"Did I not tell you to sit on the floor?" he asked; then, seeing her hurt expression, he rose and kissed her on the back of the neck. "Do as you please, Thi-Linh—but do not consciously *try* to be French." With an ironic smile he added: "I am sure your mother is much more charming than your father was."

And so quite soon she learned that one should not pay very much attention to the eccentricities of these Frenchmen but do as one pleased so long as it was not too apparent.

The morning after she arrived in his house she deliberately put on her worst tunic. It was rusty black, frayed and soiled at the cuffs. As she hoped, he noticed it and told her to go to the tailor's that very day. With fear in her heart she asked if she might get a tunic of flowered black tissue over yellow. "You may get whatever you wish," he said. "But of course," he added, "you need not be extravagant."

So she changed to her plum-colored cai-ao, tied the lavender kerchief over her head, and set out for the shop of Yuen Lok, the Chinaman.

What ecstasy! She sat in the midst of drifts of color as bolts of cloth were unrolled. Smoke of black tissue and smoldering cerise; dragon-green and stiff purple. . . . She felt quite economical when she ordered only two tunics, one a simple brown cai-ao with black trousers, and the other a rich affair of flowered black grenadine over burnished silk. For the latter she chose trousers of black stamped in gold with a longevity pattern. After that she went to a shoe shop and bought two pairs of sandals. Then she returned home, coolly answering those who spoke and pausing only to tell Mama Thi-Bao of her purchases. It gave her extreme pleasure to observe that, as she told of her new clothes, Vu-Trong-Khai's three brats stood by listening with amazement and not a little awe. I am a person of importance now, she thought.

During the next few days she organized the household. Justin had employed two Annamite boys, one to cook and another to serve and keep house. The former did not meet with her approval, so she dismissed him and arranged for another. She was careful to find out beforehand if this second cook knew how to plan meals for a Frenchman; she knew only vaguely what Frenchmen liked and ate. However, with a splendid flare of authority, she instructed this cook to show her the day's menu each morning, also to draw up an account of the money spent in marketing at the end of every week. She was determined to show skill as a manager, for she knew the servants would talk and

eventually Kim Khouan would hear this gossip and realize he had missed an exceptional opportunity.

She did not allow herself to spend much time thinking of Kim Khouan. But now and then when his dark image rose before her she indulged in the luxury of cruelty. Having told herself that she no longer loved him, she could afford to consider his faults. Undoubtedly he would remain always in the shop of his father and grow fat and want many children. Or, if he did go to Saïgon, he would never be more than a clerk. While she—ah, she would seize every opportunity! Later she would make this French husband take her down to the coast, perhaps even to Hanoi or to China. And when he left her—well, there were other Frenchmen, and by that time she would have learned much. Oh yes, she would rise! She could see herself in a French gown, with her hair done in the European manner, and answering to the name Yvonne or Marie. Yes, it was much better . . . much. . . . Those dusks by the pool . . . frail little cobwebs that were torn . . . but only cobwebs. . . . I am a person of importance now, she told herself for the second time.

And this Frenchman was very kind to her. At first she seemed to draw within herself when he touched her or kissed her. It was not revulsion, for he was very handsome; perhaps, she reflected, it was because she had never been caressed by anyone except Kim Khouan. But soon that feeling drifted into obscurity

—although she was not yet conscious of a complete yielding. Whenever he came close to her she felt that another and darker presence was approaching; and it was not his touch or mouth that caused a momentary breathless swooning of her senses but the hands and lips of a phantom lover.

The compound was hedged with crimson hibiscus, and through the breach at the gate the river was visible. Here, when the brassy sun smote the foliage, lemon-trees unloaded their fragrance; or, the brief twilight vanished, a ghost of wild lilacs prowled across the air.

Justin liked the compound, particularly at night. Usually he sat on the steps after dinner and listened to Thi-Linh play the guitar. Thi-Linh too found contentment in those evenings. She would sing the few little French songs her mother had taught her and also many Annamite songs. Justin seemed to prefer the latter.

"Indo-China—" he murmured once after she had sung a little Cambodian air, "do you suppose I, a Frenchman, shall ever know it?"

She did not quite understand but after a moment she ventured:

"Indo-China is a very superstitious country." Something apologetic in her tone. "When I was a little girl I was told that the Sacred Dragon held up Annam, with his heart in Hué, and that one must not dig too deeply in the earth or he would be disturbed, perhaps

even wounded, and his blood would turn the soil red." She laughed. "Then I went to the Mission and—"

"I suppose they told you it was not true?" he interposed with that half satirical smile of his. Then he leaned toward her and touched her shoulder. "Believe me, Thi-Linh, they lied at the Mission—for a great dragon *does* hold up Annam, and you must always believe it. Do you understand?"

She could not tell whether he was serious or not; he smiled yet there was an earnest look in his eyes. He laughed at her mystified expression.

"Keep your legends, Thi-Linh," he added. "For they will be here when the French myths are gone."

And then he leaned back against the veranda post and was silent. In the dusk his white forearms gleamed. She had an impulse to touch them, to run her fingers over the silken hairs and the muscles that rippled when he moved. In the cool air idled the scent of frangipani.

"Li-on-li-on-sai," she sang huskily, plucking the strings of her guitar. Behind the words another voice sang softly: "Thi-Linh, I am a harpstring shivering at your touch. . . ." The chord twanged, and a sudden flight of fireflies reeled upward like sparks from that metallic singing. Tonight, she thought, for the first time. . . . I want him . . . but I shall be happy merely to touch those strong, pale wrists. . . .

That was a week ago; and now it had been three weeks since she had come to his house.

7

With her surrender she seemed drawn into a protecting presence. Immediately she found herself taking a pride in his physical being, in the lazy strength of him as he lay about the house or his attitudes of unconscious grace as he sat talking with her or working. This strength was not of muscles but of hard flesh, and it seemed to express a passionate restraint.

He was not, she realized, entirely handsome. But there was something arresting about him. Particularly his hair. A little reddish streak lay like rust on the tip of one deep wave, and she liked to see it take fire in the light and possess a darting nimbus that made her think of the ghostly radiance hovering over the faintly russet hair of the priest's genie. Whenever she saw this her spirit seemed to bend down at his feet as Father Mehry had taught her to genuflex before the image in the chapel. Suddenly, mysteriously, he had become a figure almost symbolical, to whom she gave without understanding.

Most of the time he seemed drawn in behind that sheath of strength, emerging only when they came into actual physical contact, and then this touch translated a feeling impossible for him to speak because of the differences in their racial temperaments. That these differences were great she perceived, and she made an effort, immensely pathetic, to annihilate them.

She had learned to like the food that Justin ate,

and she was rapidly cultivating his table manners. There was one habit of the French that she found very easy to enjoy, that was the use of nuoc-da, "the stone of water," or, as Justin called it, glacé. It was extremely pleasant to take drinks chilled with ice. However, she found difficulty in learning to drink without making noises. Those little sucking sounds were part of Annamite etiquette; they expressed approval. But they distressed Justin, therefore, they must not be.

He was very patient. When she used the wrong fork or knife he pretended not to see; this kindness made her ashamed and eager to learn. Only once did he become angry with her, and that was in the dead of noon when the hot air shone as though polished. "In the name of God, don't sit like a monkey!" he exclaimed as she crouched near by, knees thrust up and body hung between them, like an Annamite. A painful flush spread over her, and she felt miserably grotesque.

How can I be like his people? she cried out within herself.

But when dusk came and they sat together in the compound where the palms rocked softly, the notes of her guitar seemed to weave them closer together.

"Thi-Linh," he said suddenly, "has there ever been another man?"

It came so abruptly that the breath seemed wrenched out of her throat.

"Yes," she half whispered.

"He was not a Frenchman?" he guessed.

"He was an Annamite boy. . . ."

"You loved him?"

Why did he ask her these questions? They hurt her terribly. She could scarcely articulate the words:

"Yes, I loved him. . . ."

Her eyes were lowered and he commanded: "Look at me, Thi-Linh."

In the dusk his blurred pupils seemed filled with a remote trembling—she wanted to grope behind that look and draw out what was hinted there. Did he care? Or was it only egotistical jealousy?

"If I went away," he asked, "would you go back to this Annamite boy?"

Suddenly she felt very calm. "Never," she said; and repeated, "never."

He smiled slowly, and there was something sad in his eyes.

"Faithful Thi-Linh," he murmured. Then he sighed, and another look came over his face, strange, distant, and ironic—an expression he often had and which she had come to regard as a barrier unconsciously flung up between her and the thoughts that lay at the core of him. When he spoke he talked to the dusk. "How much our women could learn from you; yes, and we men, too—if we only would." He smiled that half satirical smile to himself. "Such fools, we Frenchmen! We come here and take you as wives, and we say, 'Ah, we know the Annamite woman!' Stupid!

As if a race could be translated by going to bed with its women!"

She let her hand rest lightly on his knee. "You always say things I do not understand."

He looked at her quickly, as though unaware of her until she spoke. The firm softness of his knee was under her hand. She knew that she could reach up and draw him to her, hold him fast. But she knew also that this could not destroy the world that lay between them at that moment.

"How can I explain to you when I cannot explain to myself?" There was a momentary silence. "At times . . . well, at times I feel like a small, white shadow in the midst of something dark and warm—something friendly—but something I can only feel with my hands, or my body, but never understand. If I could, then I might be great. If I could, then I would be able to tell France a little about this colony of hers." He sighed. "I wonder if France, too, is not a small white shadow in the midst of something dark. . . ." Again he was silent for an interval, then he quoted ironically:

> "I am cool water flowing with the night;
> I am the sweat of men flowing with the day—"

Thi-Linh experienced a little sensation of pleasure. "It is your own poetry?"

He nodded.

"Why do you never write verses to me?" she asked.

He caught her chin in his hand and looked at her.

"All that I am doing now is about you, about this country—which is you. . . . I am trying so hard to learn it, this Indo-China of yours; and will it simply result in incoherent feeling? . . . God! how much emotion we accumulate in living! What capacity to feel! And how many half-ideas, half-dreams—a mass of incomplete erudition! We fill up with it—slowly—like a glass filling with red wine—and then suddenly someone crashes the glass, and the wine spills—to earth, of course, to be absorbed, and then later distilled again by who knows how many such inadequate fools as I." And again he fell into poetry:

> "But this I know,
> That all things cease when I
> have ceased to be."

" 'Ceased to be'?" she repeated.

"Dead."

She was puzzled. "But you said . . . there was something in us that went on—like the light of a candle—didn't you?"

"Yes," he affirmed. "But I mean the *I* that I am, Justin Batteur—he will be finished." As he talked a cold twilight seemed to sift upon her. "And with him all the beauty, all the ecstasies, all the half-learning that he has picked up. Stupid, isn't it?"

The sudden stridulation of an insect made her shudder, "Talk of something else," she begged. "I do not like to hear you speak of souls."

And so she abandoned her desperate efforts to understand this Frenchman and contented herself with the mysterious but kindly being whom she had acknowledged as protector; the half man, half god who lay working on a chaise longue through the day, brooding and repressed, and who for a moment in the twilight took on the semblance of a lover.

Often Monsieur Malardier came to visit, and while he was there she felt herself excluded from the conversation. Or, if she was noticed, it seemed that the commissaire smiled upon her as he would upon a prize chattel that he envied his friend—an envy made amicable in view of the fact that at least she belonged to one of his countrymen. She resented it, and in consequence adopted toward him an attitude of tolerant friendliness.

Once three Frenchmen who had arrived on the boat from Phnom-Penh came to the house for déjeuner. She sat at the table with them because Justin wished it, and as they talked in quick, staccato French, often smiling in her direction, she heard her name once or twice; and it seemed to her that the sharp tones were spear-points upon which she was tossed about playfully and cruelly. One, a tall, bearded fellow with dark skin, chucked her under the chin and remarked that she was "a pretty little piece." She merely smiled contemptuously, all the while gazing intently at the tawny shadows under his eyes and throat. Afterward, with fine scorn, she told Justin that he was a "dirty half-

caste"; and it annoyed her when Justin smiled faintly.

Justin gave her many French books to read, some of them books of poetry. She liked the flowing lines of Lamartine and Baudelaire. Among these volumes were several French novels. They disturbed and excited her.

In fancy she saw cool streets dappled with the shadows of trees where men and women sat at tables and drank wine and ate strange food. Or she tried to construct pictures of great Parisian theaters, with the result that she created a preposterous vision of immense lamp-beaded glooms, in which bodies with French faces and Annamite costumes gesticulated and screamed as the actors did in the theaters at Phnom-Penh.

When the day had stretched itself and yawned, and a passionate breath of flowers excited the air, she and Justin would sit with the cool darkness about them, and she would urge him to talk of France. More than once a question trembled in her throat, and she let it die. But to herself she said: Why should not he take me to France? And following that a sickening dread would run through her. What shall I do when he goes away? she asked herself. Then, with poignant hunger, her gaze would fasten upon him, seated a few steps above her, his legs faintly outlined in a sarong, his strong shoulders sagging in a khaki blouse; and that feeling of dread would become so intense that she

seemed to contract to a white shaft that, sword-like, forbade him to leave.

A month had passed since her uncelebrated wedding.

8

It was the first night of the full moon.

All day Thi-Linh had tried to convince herself that she was very calm. But whenever she stirred she seemed aware of a shadow that slipped out of her and lagged momentarily, like another figure that moved with her and now and then lost step.

In the late afternoon a vicious purpose, forming nebulously through the day, led her to put on her finest tunic, that dream garment of black tissue over yellow.

Once in Phnom-Penh she had seen a plant the French called agave, a tall bush with thorned leaves cruel as sabres. As she dressed she felt that she was draping silk over an agave. Once or twice her finger-nails caught in the frail stuff and she indulged in the fancy that she had pricked herself.

Justin came in while she was dressing and looked surprised.

"I am going to visit Mama Thi-Bao tonight," she told him. "She has not seen my new cai-ao."

"Charming!" he smiled, surveying her. When he came closer to kiss her she wanted to tell him to keep away or he would be pricked.

At dinner she went through the pretense of eating and afterward sat on the veranda with Justin for a few minutes, restlessly tapping the floor with her new sandals. When darkness groped into the compound she took her leave. "I shall return in an hour," she said.

As she moved along the road a pirogue, stealing by near the bank, filled the quiet with stealthy sound. The boatman was crooning. *"Ho, kouan! Ho, kouan!"* Perhaps, she thought, he is going to the wedding.

The road was white underfoot, powdering away into thick darkness. Often shapeless forms passed with a lisp of bare feet. Suddenly she thought of the evil genii that prowled abroad after nightfall, but her heart was too heavy to admit fear. Nevertheless, she was glad when she reached the shops and pallid rays of dusty light shone athwart the street.

Suddenly her blood leaped excitedly. Did she hear laughing voices above the indefinite murmur that swelled from open doors and passing figures—or was it her imagination? Could it be that they were coming already?

She hurried, reaching Vu-Trong-Khai's shop breathless.

Her mother was seated on the little platform in the rear, and the one lamp seemed to accentuate the hollows of her eyes in which only faint gleams told of life. Vu-Trong-Khai was lying on a mat smoking opium. The acrid smell, mingled with the smoke from

the lamp, was sickening. The children were nowhere in sight. She tried to appear calm under her mother's searching look, sinking beside her and beginning a conversation about the incidents of the day.

The moments crawled by, prodded by her rush of inconsequential talk. Suddenly a crowd of chattering little boys ran by the doorway. She started. Did she hear the smothered ring of gongs?

"It is Kim Khouan's wedding procession," her mother announced.

She laughed nervously.

"Oh yes," she said coolly. "I had forgotten this was his wedding-night."

As the clanging sounds came nearer she wanted to creep into her mother's arms and cling. But she kept on smiling and talking; something of hysteria in her voice.

Now a buzz of voices swelled the ringing, spinning toward her like a hot crystal filled with bees. Her mother rose and went outside; Vu-Trong-Khai looked up startled, then drew himself to his feet and followed. In front of the shop, a group of children had gathered, clapping their hands and shouting.

Thi-Linh felt herself drawn irresistibly toward the approaching music. She was standing beside her mother, gazing down the road. The children were looking at her, and one little girl stroked the edge of her tunic. On a sudden she was aware of her rich dress. A ghostly bride, decked out for a phantom

wedding! In a moment the specter who was her bridegroom would appear, and then—

The gongs were beating against her ears now, and in the road not twenty yards away a carnival of torches and lanterns advanced in a luxury of color.

She set her face in a cold, cruel smile.

Several nearly naked little boys scampered by, casting flowers in the road.

I wonder if all these people see the thorns under my tunic, she thought crazily.

At the head of the procession walked two figures, one with a dark, folded turban on his head. As she saw him cymbals seemed to clash against her ears and vibrate down her spine. In a moment, she said to herself, he will be here and I shall throw off these robes and fling myself before him, so that he will fall upon the thorns of me and be crucified.

Deliberately she stepped out in front of her mother; there the gauzy quiver of passing torches and lanterns would wave against her.

He was abreast of her now, and for an instant she thought he would pass without seeing her, then something, perhaps the intensity of her gaze, drew his eyes.

And suddenly all that vicious sharpness within her seemed to go limp and fall into the dust under his feet. In that fraction of a second, his dark eyes looking into hers, she saw an expression that sent a blinding ecstasy through her. For a moment she was lying

in the jungle pool, and he was bending over her. . . .

". . . Thou wilt share the couch of thy Master; wilt give him sons to perpetuate his race. . . . And they will maintain the Cult. . . . Thy hair will whiten; wrinkles will meet in the shrunken skin of thy cheeks; but thou mayest behold with serenity the approach of old age. . . . Ye newly married, go in peace. . . ."

Yes, newly married! For had not she already celebrated a deathless wedding with him, there at the pool? This ceremony was only a gesture—for the world. . . .

He had passed on, and where he had been were torches and lanterns swaying over slender shapes. And although she did not stir, a body hot and slim stepped out of her and joined the procession. . . . They were in the pagoda, beneath a canopy embroidered with the phenix and the lotus, and their hands were joined as they prostrated themselves before the great Buddha Huyen-Vu whose gilded face shimmered through a film of incense. . . . Gongs throbbed again; they were in the street, marching at the head of a gay procession. . . . She saw the open door of his house, the red banners staring vividly from the walls of the Hall of Honor. Before them was the altar of their Ancestors, the little tablets gleaming like white tombstones. . . .

"It was very splendid," she heard her mother saying. "I suppose they will be happy."

She was still staring at the empty street, but she was no longer hot and nauseated. Her serenity surprised her. She felt as though she had divided magically into

two parts, as she knew the tiny creatures of the swamp divided and became separate living entities, and one part had drifted off—forever. Something eternally youthful and shining had gone out of her to keep a tryst, while she herself stood behind and watched it dispassionately. Yes, she echoed to herself, I suppose they will be happy.

9

Thi-Linh thought a great deal and very seriously in the days following Kim Khouan's marriage. The result of it was that suddenly she realized she had grown into a woman.

Her affection for Justin was quite genuine; and equally genuine was the quiet love for Kim Khouan that had been molded out of all the passionate anguish of her first intense feeling for him. As a girl she could not have maintained this fealty to two loves. But now, as a woman, she could surmount infidelity (which was an extravagance of the undeveloped—she had read that in a French novel) and herself be the faithful mistress of one man while in her heart she was the wife of another. To the boy she had given the voluptuous excess of young love, which made her capable of a more even attachment to the man, and both experiences created an emotional balance that unseated neither one.

Life became less a romance but more dependable; whether more satisfying, she did not pause to analyze.

She did not have to worry with the uncertainties of love as it was sung by the poets; there was the reality of tenderness in Justin's touch, and there was poignant glamor in the image of Kim Khouan that now dwelt unobtrusively but no less enduringly in her mind.

Thi-Linh had learned enough about her Frenchman to understand his needs and desires; if she had known more, such as those intricacies of thought that had troubled her in the beginning, undoubtedly they would have had many arguments. As it was, she understood him enough to know he wanted her to read books and discuss them with him; also to help him in his work without knowing too much about it. That she had a very definite part in the creation of his book she realized. Justin asked her many questions about the customs of her people and their legends. He had begun this book shortly after she came to live with him, and he told her that within another month it would be finished; he was writing swiftly, he said, "under an inspiration." The title was "Une Fille d'Annam."

The rainy season had commenced, and it affected Justin's disposition. He was never deliberately unkind, but often he hurt her unintentionally. Once a friend came to call, accompanied by her mother, her grandmother, her two aunts, her three little brothers, and her baby sister; and when they departed, after an hour or so of chattering and exchanges of betel among themselves, she found Justin in a rage.

"I won't have all those screaming brats coming here!" he said. "Nor those women, spitting betel-juice all over the floor."

"Then must I give up my friends?" she asked.

He was contrite. "No, of course not. But they irritate me when I am working." Then he added tenderly, "I want only you, Thi-Linh."

She herself was not unaffected by the heat. A permanent dampness had entered the house and was soaked into the boards, into the furniture, and even into their clothes. A hot indignation against the elements made her weak every time she found mildew on one of her garments. At times she seemed to swell with an ineffectual fury directed at the humidity and the damp-lipped clouds that browsed sensually over the panting earth. The nights sagged down like saturated black wadding; the days fumed with showers, and in the brief intervals between rains the sky was a streaming cobalt that seemed to include earth and people in a sticky, limpid bath.

Justin went off on a journey with Monsieur Malardier to visit some ruins on the other side of the river, deep in the jungle. He was away ten days, and the lonely house seemed like a shroud that contracted about her. She could have gone to stay with her mother, but she hated the thought of returning to those smelly rooms behind the shop. Moreover, she would have had to sleep on a mat, and she was accustomed to a bed by now. Often she awoke in the mornings feel-

ing nauseated. At midday, when the heat was most intense, the slightest incident irritated her. Twice she thought she had fever, for her temples seemed to expand hotly and generate febrile ripples. She decided to see her mother and get some medicine, but she put it off, and then she felt better.

The empty house became unendurable, so she invited Nanette, the congaï of Monsieur Malardier, to stay with her until the two Frenchmen returned. She did not like Nanette, but she was company. Nanette, in spite of her name, was a pure Annamite from Quan-Tri, a restless little creature with incendiary thoughts. In turn, she made Thi-Linh restless, and filled her mind with smoldering dreams. Nanette had lived in Hanoi with a French officer, and she told Thi-Linh about the gay life there, and the great number of men who had been her admirers.

She brought with her several French novels, among them one that sent Thi-Linh's thoughts tumbling into dangerous patterns. It was by a man named Pierre Louys—"Aphrodite." The story of a certain Chrysis, courtezan of ancient Alexandria. She and Nanette discussed the book at length.

"When Monsieur Malardier gets tired of me," said Nanette, "I shall return to Hanoi—or perhaps I shall go to Saïgon—and be like this Chrysis."

"Isn't that dreadfully wicked?" asked Thi-Linh, excited.

"Well, if one is going to be wicked then why not be

as wicked as possible? Certainly I have no intention of being good—it is stupid. No Annamite would take me for a wife now, and French husbands do not last, so why not have many and get everything I can out of each?"

"But to have so many men," Thi-Linh persisted, "and think only of getting money out of them is no better than being like girls who sell themselves for a night."

Nanette smiled indulgently and wisely.

"No," she contradicted with the air of one who knew. "There are degrees of love. Love has its distinctions—like society. First, there is the woman who is married to a man by a priest or a bonze; then the wife who simply lives with a man because he wants her and can give her the things she desires; and then the woman who is beautiful and clever enough to choose her temporary husbands and change when she wishes; and last, the stupid little creature who sells herself indiscriminately. Femme, maîtresse, courtisane, prostituée—what difference except in the degrees of respectability and profit?"

For some reason Nanette made Thi-Linh feel uneasy. Thi-Linh decided that Nanette was very bad; and she felt relieved when she went home. But in her drowsy hours the image of the woman Chrysis dwelt fabulously in her thoughts.

The night that Justin returned she was awakened by a jerking sensation under her heart that brought her

upright in the bed. She must have uttered a cry, for Justin awoke and asked her what was the matter. "Only a pain," she said, "or perhaps it was a dream." But for a long while she lay in humid blackness, frightened and trembling.

The next morning she set out for the shop of Vu-Trong-Khai. A brutal radiance blistered the river, and the palm fronds quivered against the sky like green gashes. Suddenly, as she neared the shop, the tremulous flanks of sunlight seemed to sweat blood. All those little red drops made her dizzy, and she hurried frenziedly. She saw the familiar doorway ahead, and then all those little drops ran together and streamed across her eyes.

When she became fully conscious again she was breathing winy coolness. Her mother was bending over her, a look of interrogation in her eyes.

"Mama Thi-Bao. . . ."

"That such a disgrace should come upon us!" her mother moaned.

Thi-Linh felt tears in her eyes. She was not crying because of what she had suddenly realized but because of that look of her mother's.

"It is terrible," the older woman wailed. "He will turn you out."

A cold sickness filled Thi-Linh's heart. She closed her eyes.

"If he does," she breathed, "I shall go away."

"To give yourself to other men?" her mother

demanded angrily. "To further offend the Ancestors?"

She opened her eyes to a blur of tears. "I am sorry, Mama Thi-Bao. . . ."

"Who is the man?"

A tiny stream of betel-juice made a red thread across her mother's chin; Thi-Linh thought she looked pitifully grotesque.

She choked as she pronounced the name.

"Kim Khouan!" Thi-Bao echoed. "If it had only been a Frenchman, then your husband might . . . And I had believed you so innocent!"

Her face sank upon Thi-Linh's breast. With each quiver of her mother's body the girl felt a growing despair. She tried to imagine what Justin would say, and the despair increased.

Her mother, now quiet, raised herself. "You must tell him," she said. "I shall go with you."

"No. I will go alone."

"But—"

"No. You must not suffer that interview."

She faced the blackness that was careening upon her. Half-remembered words of Nanette darted maddeningly through her despair. The very dreadfulness of this catastrophe demanded urgent action.

"I will go now," she decided. She dried her eyes and smoothed rice-powder over her face. "Do you forgive me, Mama Thi-Bao?" she asked, pausing at the door.

Her mother had assumed that old pose, that attitude of tired resignation. She was chewing betel listlessly; the red thread had dried on her chin.

"You are my daughter," she said at length. And then she sighed: "But I had thought to be the proud grandmother of Frenchmen."

10

Justin was reclining on the chaise longue writing when she reached the house. He merely glanced up as she approached.

A damp breath of soggy earth and rain-bruised flowers rose on the heat that throbbed up from the ground and spilled its fluid cadences, diluted, between the rattan blinds. Even the stillness had a radiant quality.

Thi-Linh sank down at his feet.

His sarong had fallen apart and one bare leg hung on the edge of the chaise longue, a sandal dangling from the toes. As she observed this characteristic pose all the breath seemed to stop in her throat. Suddenly he stretched. She knew that his body under the clothing made a warm cross; and she wanted to throw herself upon it and die nailed to his strength. Instead, her gaze dropped to his ankle, very close and touched with a faint glisten as the sunlight irradiated the tiny hairs, and she bent swiftly and kissed it. She did not look up, but she could feel his surprised gaze.

"Justin," she began, "you have been very good to

me. . . ." Still she did not look up. "I am going away, Justin."

He laughed. One hand slipped under her chin and lifted it.

"What is all this?" he demanded, smiling.

Her eyes met his, glazed with unhappiness. He seemed far away and in twilight. Gradually the smile left his face.

"Are you sick?"

Then she took his hands and pressed them under her heart. "Can you feel something stirring there?" she whispered. Then, suddenly, a fierce nausea passed over her. She dropped her hands and clinched them. "I don't want a baby!" she cried piteously.

Her eyes were fixed upon him, and she thought he would never speak. In the compound, insects sang monotonously. His lips were tight, and the muscles of his cheeks stood out. Finally he said:

"The . . . Annamite boy?"

She nodded. Again he was silent for a long while. She could scarcely believe it when she saw a faint smile being born in one corner of his mouth.

"What a joke!" he muttered, more to himself than to her. Then he spoke directly to her, that satirical smile still at the corner of his mouth. "I would be a very poor Frenchman," he said, "if I could not accept this—this little joke that your country has played on me."

II

One evening four months later a black-toothed baya came to the house, and a few hours afterward a thin, startled wail mingled with the soft cries of the night-birds.

Two mornings later Thi-Linh was up and about the house. She decided to call the boy Justin—which brought again a faint ironic smile to the Frenchman's lips. At first he took more notice of the child than she did; indeed, Thi-Linh tried to appear utterly indifferent. Justin did not write that day, and he lay on the chaise longue smoking many cigarettes and drinking brandy-sodas. She sat in a chair beside him and tried to read a novel, but most of the time her gaze stole to the wailing little figure that squirmed on the bed inside. Several times she caught Justin's studied gaze upon her, and finally those looks drove her into the bedroom where she stood looking down quizzically at her baby.

There was no resemblance to Kim Khouan in the shriveled little face, she observed critically. As she stood there, trying to be impersonal, her feeling was half resentment and half an emotion that she tried to force out of her heart. Suddenly it came to her that this child was born of her first love, and as she accepted that realization, those little waving fists seemed to beat against her breasts. She knelt quickly and buried her lips in the warm, palpitating flesh.

She kept little Justin for two weeks. Justin, the man, said the baby might stay in the house, but Thi-Linh knew he was only being kind and that the child would disturb him, and later annoy him. So at the end of a fortnight she took little Justin to her mother. Vu-Trong-Khai objected until Thi-Linh told him she would give her mother part of her monthly allowance to keep the child.

When Thi-Linh returned to the house a thin ghostly wail haunted her. Her hands, for the past fourteen days so busy with a tiny brown body, felt robbed of a tender occupation. Of course she could see her child every day but the fact that he was no longer with her all the time gave her the feeling that she was permanently severed from a part of herself.

Justin was compiling a book of Indo-Chinese legends. The manuscript of "Une Fille d'Annam" had been sent to France. He told her that very soon great machines would make many copies of it.

"And when you see the book," he said with a smile, "you will find your name in the front. " 'To Thi-Linh this story belongs,' it will say."

He was very considerate of her. Not once had he asked her about Kim Khouan. Now that the baby was born, he seemed to regard it as a fact to be accepted without discussion or reproach; a closed incident.

As for herself, she looked upon the child as something inexplicable but, now that she thought about it,

inevitable. The straight line of her life had momentarily broken to admit another life, and then continued in the same even course, unaffected except by a memory of exquisite suffering and the realization that a part of herself had become another tangible being. For some reason Kim Khouan and the baby had no connection in her thoughts. Each was a separate and distinct event; one a poignant romance destined to remain that because it was finished, and the other a somewhat puzzling reality whose future was darkly indefinite.

Once or twice she saw Kim Khouan in the village but she turned off quickly before they met. She did not know whether he knew of his child or not. It was possible that he did know, for there had been talk among the villagers, and although they might not be aware that it was his child, he would realize the truth. Often she caught smiling insinuations as she walked along the street, and she returned them with a look of utter indifference or contempt. She was the mistress of her own life, and the innuendoes of others did not affect her imperviousness or trouble her.

The tension of the past few months settled down to an even tempo. When she was not helping Justin she was reading or sewing; and in the late afternoons she would visit her stepfather's shop and smile over a tiny gurgling creature. The baby amused and distracted her; Justin had become a pleasant warmth that

satisfied her natural craving for affection; and the memory of Kim Khouan was the wistful indiscretion that relieved the stable reality of the man she possessed. What more could she want? She saw little of Nanette and allowed herself to think even less of the lurid ideas the girl had planted in her brain.

Stung-Treng faced the east, and every late afternoon when all the light seemed dead except behind the houses and palms where the sky throbbed a rosy hue, it was Thi-Linh's habit to walk along the main road and watch the people. At this time of the day their bodies seemed so soft; and the young men's throats shone with a pallor that disturbed her. She wondered if she liked to watch those young men because they reminded her of Kim Khouan, but the reason seemed more subtle than that. Always there were numbers bathing in the river and still others lying with their brown flanks against the faun-gray flanks of mud; and all those wet or drying bodies seemed to twist together deep within her like the roots of desire.

This emotion was alarming. It was not lust, she knew. Was it the impersonal expression of an affection for people at large that was in no way untrue to Justin? It made her think of that Frenchman's book, "Aphrodite." Chrysis, the exquisite, walking beside the shores of Alexandria, craving men. But, Thi-Linh reflected, she did not crave men—at least, not as this ancient Egyptian woman had. It was

simply that her vision seemed to draw them close while she herself yielded an indefinable warmth to them, as a mother imparts warmth to the buds of suckling nakedness that later become men. In those moments, walking there beside the river, she felt old with the age of forgotten years.

One morning Nanette came to call bringing the news that Kim Khouan and his wife had gone to Saïgon. "He is going to work in a bank," announced the girl, closely watching Thi-Linh, who looked sufficiently interested not to appear utterly indifferent.

When Thi-Linh was alone she breathed a sigh that was relief. Now there would never be any danger of an encounter. The reality of Kim Khouan had completely yielded to a romantic ghost; and ghosts, she knew, did not track the polished surface of illusions. Thi-Linh felt secure in her complete possession of him.

12

Six months had passed since Justin sent the manuscript of "Une Fille d'Annam" to France; and one morning, after the boat from Phnom-Penh had arrived, Thi-Linh held in her hand a paper-back volume and gazed at an inscription in the front. "To Thi-Linh this story belongs." A fierce pride rose in her. It is my book, she thought; I have given it to him. Justin glowed.

"From my friend Leroux," he said, tapping a letter

that had come with the book. "He says the Académie Française has recognized my work. Do you know what that means?"

She felt a little dart, half joy and half dread. "It is a very great honor," she replied slowly. His success filled her with immense pride, and at the same time it made her vaguely uneasy. Praise from France was a bit alarming; in some way France seemed her enemy.

"It means that my books have a chance to live," he went on. "It means I have produced something of permanent value." And he added simply, "I owe it to you, Thi-Linh."

He took her in his arms, and that embrace was reassuring. Often during the past two months she had seen in his face that distant look that always disturbed her; and now she was happy that this news had come to distract him.

"Tomorrow Malardier and I start for Wat Phu," he announced. "We shall be gone about fifteen days."

"And I may go with you?" she asked.

"It is no trip for a woman," he protested. "And think, how glad you will be to see me when I return!"

"You are tired of me?"

That lazy smile that she loved rebuked her.

The next morning she went down to the river to watch the boat leave. Justin, leaning on the aft-rail, waved to her as the craft glided out upon the Mé-Kong. That picture would always remain in her mind: the

flash of white teeth under the blur of his helmet, the sunlight golden on his khaki shirt, and the little gleams that twinkled on his leather boots; a figure that gradually contracted to a pale pin-point as his topi winked a last time in the heat haze.

That night Thi-Linh, alone in the house, felt transfixed by the black heat. She had decided to go to stay with her mother when a click-clack of wooden sandals in the compound preceded Nanette.

"Well," said the girl, dropping upon the chaise longue and lighting a cigarette, "I am going to Saïgon."

Thi-Linh looked at her in surprise. Her attention was distracted by the insolent grace with which Nanette held her cigarette. Her hands, she noticed, were beautifully slim, and there was a certain narrow loveliness in her face, accentuated by a heavy coat of powder. Reclining there in her soft tunic, with the faintest hint of diamonds at her ears, and gazing at Thi-Linh through a drift of smoke, she had something undeniably French about her. It was an air that Thi-Linh admired. At the same time she did not entirely approve of Nanette; she was a little vicious, she thought.

"To Saïgon?" she repeated.

Nanette smiled cynically. " 'Love is a form of vanity, and when the beloved ceases to flatter, nothing remains but wounded pride,' " she quoted lightly. "After all, there is much truth in the proverbs. . . . I am leaving Monsieur Malardier."

"You mean——"

"To be exact," she interrupted, "we quarreled—he has been most odious of late—and as I suspected he was about to suggest that we terminate our little marriage, I was clever enough to make the suggestion first." She exhaled through her nostrils, coolly, adding: "It is always best to forestall a man, for later he respects you the more for preserving your face however much he may hate you at the time. Anyway, I think I have got as much out of Monsieur Malardier as possible," she went on. "And his odor has become most offensive to me lately," she finished with a grimace.

Thi-Linh was dimly troubled. "What will you do?"

Nanette shrugged. "Continue my profession of acquiring husbands." Very deliberately she flicked her cigarette away and smiled at Thi-Linh. "Your Monsieur Batteur is going back to France," she announced.

For a moment Thi-Linh stared at her without emotion. Beyond her, gauzy ephemera hurtled about the lamp in the living-room. Suddenly the mad flight of those insects made her dizzy. She laughed uneasily.

"How do you know that?" she demanded, forcing herself to smile back.

The other made a French gesture with her exquisite hands. "I know what my ears hear. Last night he showed a letter to Monsieur Malardier, a letter from France, from a friend. Monsieur Malardier said, 'Then you will be going home soon?' And your Mon-

sieur Batteur said, 'Perhaps it will be necessary.' Then they talked about France for a long while. It was after he left that we quarreled. I said that Frenchmen were dirty pigs."

Thi-Linh had grown calmer. "Did you hear him say actually that he was going?"

Nanette looked annoyed. "No. But is it not enough that he said it might be necessary?" She drew out a package of black cigarettes and extended them to Thi-Linh. "My advice to you," she said, striking a match, "is to go to Saïgon with me."

The smoke flowing through Thi-Linh's nostrils seemed to cool her head. She resolved not to let Nanette see that she was disturbed.

"Why should I go there?" she inquired, successfully at ease.

"Saïgon is full of officers who wear gold braid," Nanette responded.

Thi-Linh crushed down the thoughts that came into her mind. "I do not believe Justin would plan to leave without telling me," she announced.

"Little fool!" Nanette's smile seemed to say. "When he has left," she observed, "you will wish you had gone to Saïgon with me." Her small, delicate face came closer to Thi-Linh and she looked at her appraisingly before she remarked, "You are very pretty, Thi-Linh—although a trifle pale—you would look well in a gown from Paris and high-heeled slippers."

There was an uncertain quiver in Thi-Linh's laugh. "I think you have a devil in you," she said with pretended lightness.

Nanette smiled inscrutably. "Some day," she dreamed aloud, "perhaps I shall add the epaulettes of an admiral to my collection." Then her nostrils distended visibly. "I hate Frenchmen!" she said quietly.

Thi-Linh was glad when Nanette had gone. For a long while she sat on the veranda. The trees in the compound seemed part of a restless sea that lapped against her. "You would look well in a gown from Paris . . ." Nanette was a wicked little fool, she thought. But that did not serve to dismiss Nanette or what she had said.

Thi-Linh had never pried into Justin's affairs, consequently it had never occurred to her to look at his mail. Nor had she had any reason to do it. But now the desk where he kept his letters drew her. The thought of what she might find made her hesitate. But at least, she told herself, I shall know the truth.

Reluctantly she went into the living-room. On top of a pile of recent mail in his desk lay a letter which she recognized as the one that had come with the copy of "Une Fille d'Annam." Her fingers were stiff and cold as she drew it out.

In the dead silence she heard the darting whirl of insects circling around the lamp. Tiny shadows flickered across the page.

" . . . and of course, my dear friend, you will be

returning to France now, for although your position is secure, it is always wise to be in the midst of things and to make new contacts. . . . There is a little apartment overlooking the Rue St. Honoré (Gournot is occupying it now, but it will be vacant in a few months) which I think is just what you desire. . . . A great book, my friend. How in God's name did you learn so well that scorched country of exile? . . ."

The paper crackled harshly as she folded it and returned it to the envelop.

". . . but it will be vacant in a few months . . ." And this house, too, will be vacant in a few months, she thought, looking about dazedly. ". . . A great book . . ." Great! And I gave it to him, she told herself with fierce exultation. I! For even he said so. " . . . How in God's name did you learn so well that scorched country of exile? . . ." Yes! How in God's name? She wanted to laugh, hysterically. Not in God's name; no; in her name!

A picture of Justin as she had last seen him rose in her mind. He had seemed so warm and certain. But now she wondered if that last glimpse was not significant, his gradual shrinking until he was lost in blinding sunlight. And was there not something of ultimate farewell in that final wave of his hand as he was carried out upon the river? Frenchmen went like that, smiling and with a light gesture. . . . Of course he would return; all his things were in the house. But that departure was a presagement.

They were cruel—white men. But, she relented, perhaps no more than dark men. For had not her brown lover forsaken her? In that moment, for the first time, Kim Khouan's love seemed pathetic and grotesque. How insufficient he had proved in the one great test! If his love had been strong enough he would have followed it, even at the cost of his father's displeasure and of offending his Ancestors. Thi-Linh had read too many novels still to think that the code of Annamite behavior could not be violated when love was opposed to filial duty.

Men: frail caricatures of what women believe them.

Her pride throbbed with a new wound. Would she always be deserted by her lovers? Her own reflection, contracted to an absurdly thin sheen on the glazed surface of a vase on the desk, seemed to spin before her in mockery. In sudden rage she seized the jar and dashed it to the floor.

A moment later the house-boy appeared with a sleepy, startled look, and she screamed for him to get out.

She wanted to rush out on the veranda and cry to the whole village that her Frenchman was about to leave her, or better still, run through the streets and give voice to her indignation. Instead, she sat down on the floor and beat the matting with her bare feet. After a few minutes this seemed ridiculous; it was reminiscent of the conduct of black-toothed bayas giving vent to their rage. She, Thi-Linh, had French

blood. Half-caste! she flung at herself the next instant.

Presently she got up and went to the shelf where Justin kept his books. A little wave of tenderness went over her as she opened the copy of "Une Fille d'Annam." "To Thi-Linh this story belongs," she read with a pang. Then she turned the pages, skimming the sentences. After a little while she sat down beside the lamp.

As she read, she passed out of the room into the pages of the book. She had become a little girl in Annam, the daughter of a mandarin. She grew quickly through cool scenes that drifted across her like sea winds. Suddenly Justin had entered the print beside her, and they were living together in a little house near the Pass of the Clouds, between Tourane and Hué, and overlooking the ocean. The days were sweet, and they became even sweeter when she carried a fragile shape in her arms: their son. And then, abruptly, the days seemed chilled. Justin's face had a distant, dreamy stare. She looked into his green eyes and saw the meadows of France. . . . He went. The loneliness of that little house near the Pass of the Clouds became unbearable, and so, with her son at her breast, she went to sleep in the ocean—that great blue ocean stretching between France and Annam.

As she finished reading the book she noticed that the light had burned low. A coolness, as before dawn, filled the room. A few insects lay dead about the base

of the lamp, and the smell of kerosene and singed wings floated on the heavy atmosphere.

She drew a deep sigh, sat there for a few minutes breathing the impure air.

Finally she stirred and went into the bedroom. The stark, pale figure of the crucifix caught her gaze. Resolutely she got some joss-sticks and lighted them before it.

"Mary, Mother of Jesus," she prayed. "You were a woman. . . ."

When she fell asleep she dreamed she saw her own body lying naked before her, magnified a thousand times. Ranks of twinkling boots marched over her; rifles were stacked upon her mouth; and a whole army spread out in bivouac upon the undulations of her bosom.

13

But no miracle occurred before daylight to show her the way; and, impatient, she went to the pagoda and burned incense before the dusty, tarnished figures on the altar.

After that she made her way to the pool where she and Kim Khouan had held their trysts. The black water was branded with sunlight, and the lotuses, no longer in bloom, spread their broad leaves in empty cups. The heat seemed to seal her reflection upon the surface in fantastic denial of her youth; it was a shriveled baya looking up at her, teeth black with

betel and hands grasping for a guitar on which to strike the notes of bitter chansons. She gazed at the caricature with a challenging smile, and then hurried away as though afraid it would follow.

When she reached the shop of Vu-Trong-Khai her limbs ached. Her mother greeted her with a look that anticipated trouble. Little Justin sprawled gleefully on the floor, kicking his feet. She picked him up and kissed him, a dank loneliness chilling her.

"I am going away," she announced abruptly.

The baby squirmed against her. Thi-Bao rolled a betel-leaf in lime and put it into her mouth.

"I am going to Saïgon," Thi-Linh amplified.

Her mother chewed for a moment before she spoke. "Does Monsieur Batteur know it?"

Thi-Linh shook her head. "I found a letter. . . . He is going back to France soon. . . ."

There was another silence. Finally her mother nodded. "Where will you get the money?"

"I have saved a little—and he has not given me this month's allowance. I shall break open the box where he keeps his money and take what belongs to me."

Thi-Bao stirred and spat. There was no expression in her face, but Thi-Linh thought she saw a glimmer in her eyes; perhaps it was only reflected sunlight.

"When does the boat leave?" the older woman asked.

"It is due in four days. . . . I am going with Nanette." After a pause she added: "I shall send you money each month to take care of little Justin."

A tremor passed over her as she said that. First her lovers, now her baby. . . . Kim Khouan, weak . . . Justin, simply the way of Frenchmen. . . . At least, she thought with pathetic exultation, I am leaving him before he leaves me.

Presently her mother spoke. "Saïgon is a large city . . ."

"Yes," said Thi-Linh, "I shall be lonely at first." Her thoughts momentarily drowsed in the memory of Justin. Simply the way of Frenchmen, she repeated to herself. Then she finished aloud. "But not for long."

Thi-Bao chewed on in silence, her face still expressionless.

"I shall pray that you make a successful marriage," she announced suddenly. After that she did not speak again.

I shall have to go back to the house and get my things, Thi-Linh thought. The baby whimpered, and the little cry drew her down until her lips moved over the tiny hands.

Her mother might have been a statue but for the slow working of her jaws; that same statue that she had been since Thi-Linh was a little girl; gaunt, melancholy, one knee thrust between her breasts and the other bent and lying motionless. Her vacant eyes were upon the doorway. Did she smile, Thi-Linh wondered.

Outside, the road trembled in a bath of white heat,

and the few people who were astir seemed to blur past the doorway. Thi-Linh was only faintly aware of their movements.

But after the heat, she thought, they will go down to the river to bathe.

14

It was some months later, in Saïgon, that Thi-Linh received a letter from her mother saying: " . . . It was, perhaps, a great mistake—but how could you know that he did not really intend to return to France, at least for some time? I suppose it was Nanette's fault, but of course she did not do it intentionally. . . . I saw him often; he always smiled most kindly and asked how the baby was. . . He had gone to Luang-Prabang when the fever came. Nguyen, who was with him, said he lived for three days, very delirious. Nguyen brought all his possessions to Monsieur Malardier. That kind gentleman told me that the last page in his diary might interest you, and asked me to send it. . . ."

Enclosed in the letter was a crumpled piece of paper, evidently jerked carelessly out of a notebook. Written across it in faltering letters was a single line:

"Thi-Linh, ma femme. . . . O pitié, mon Dieu. . . ."

Part Two: Sabre and Tunic

FOUR months had passed since she came to Saïgon; and now she called herself Marie Linh. She worked as sewing-woman in the shop of some Bombay merchants on the Rue Catinat. For more than a month she had been living alone, Nanette had a house on the Rue Paul Blanchy, and a husband who wore chevrons.

The shop where she worked faced a broad sidewalk blue with the shadows of tamarinds. Through the day the sunlight lay stagnant in the streets, giving sustained throbs as vehicles and people coursed rhythmically by. But toward late afternoon a wind scooped the heat out of the air and left it listless and dying, to be revived almost immediately by a limpid dusk in which the colored tunics of the Annamite women floated like glints in a prismatic drink.

It was then that Thi-Linh felt a sudden flow in her blood. The stupid sewing was finished; she would go home, and after dinner she would call a rickshaw and ride about the city, enjoying the dark vibrance that was Saïgon at night. Or she and some friend would go to the theater. But she preferred merely to ride. There was something voluptuous in the life that stirred under

these French lamps. And, then, there was the added excitement of looking for that nameless white face. . . .

It had happened late at night, during those hours when the air was the embodiment of a quiet rhythm. She and Nanette were riding back from the cinema. A door on the right opened abruptly, and a French officer came out; she knew he was an officer because the sudden release of light glowed about his white uniform. For a bare instant she saw his face as he turned to speak to someone inside—a quick bloom of pallor in the darkness, flower-like in its uncertainty; a gleaming edge on the contour of cheek and forehead, losing itself in shiny black hair. A moment he lingered there, then a slam shut him in darkness, and a shadow of him seemed blown down the street on the hot gush of opium fumes that followed him out. . . .

Thereafter when she rode about at night and a door opened she experienced a startled expectancy.

The room where she worked was in the rear of the shop, opening upon a court that in the morning was filled to the brim with shade, which ebbed as the sun thrust straws of light into it. By noon it shone with the motionless luster of a dry glass. And, like a glass, it responded musically to sound-touch. Chirp of scissors and ring of sandaled feet; voices and the droning tear of silk; all set to the concerted rhythm of life beyond the walls. These noises from outside were the yearning tongues of the world; Thi-Linh was a nun

in this cloister of pattern and design, patiently waiting . . . only now and then a little restless. . . .

Three other women worked there besides herself. She did not like them. She felt that they said things behind her back—things about her French blood. They all were under a fat French dressmaker, who wore shoes too tight and then complained that the equatorial climate made her feet swell. This woman, Madame Dessard, had lived in Tientsin. But also she had lived in a town on the Bosporus. Her mother was a Georgian, she said, her father a Breton.

"I met my husband in Constantinople," she recited for the sewing-women regularly every few days. "Oh, he was very rich! Then we went to Tientsin, and he became director in a bank. Oh, I had an automobile then, and ten servants! And I was going to send my little boy to school in France. But, my God, the fire came! . . . I stood in the street and watched my house burn with my little boy inside and my husband trying to save him. . . . Everything went, everything —for my husband died of burns afterward. Now here I am, Madame Adrienne Dessard, working for Bombay men!"

Thi-Linh could never understand why, but when Madame Dessard was telling that story she always had an insane desire to laugh. It was a story utterly tragic, but this powdered, sweating woman, her feet cramped into shoes too small, made it seem ludicrous.

Invariably, a few minutes after she had told of her

misfortune, Madame Dessard would become very angry and scold the women. Or she would thump one of them on the head with a thimble. "Look at that seam!" she would scream. "Name of a black bitch! You Annamite women are cows!"

For hours she would be very confidential, recounting her history for the benefit of the four women who went on sewing without listening; then, suddenly, she would remember that she belonged to a superior race, and go into a fit of temper over some trivial incident. . . . Every night she rode about in a rickshaw—alone. Often Thi-Linh saw her seated by herself in some café, her face flushed with drink, and her feet, half hidden under the table, discreetly crossed above shining high-heeled slippers. She wondered why Madame Dessard was never with Frenchmen. . . .

The Indians who owned the shop moved about with dark scowls that, when doing business with French customers, metamorphosed magically into a fluid willingness to please. Thi-Linh had a great contempt for them. In spite of pomades and perfumes, they had an odor that made her think of greasy bodies soaked with food-smells and lying in the sun. They worshiped at a walled temple on the Rue Ohier. She had to pass there on her way to and from work, and its portal always yawned at her with a half rancid, half musky breath. One of the priests, a young black fellow with a red mark on his forehead, smiled at her frequently.

Many Frenchwomen came to the shop, and they in-

terested her extremely. Suave and cool-looking in their imported clothes, or very fat and fanning themselves breathlessly, they hovered about, stroking metal cloths from Benares or running their white fingers over furs from Yunnan, all the while talking swiftly among themselves or arguing over prices. Generally the Bombay merchants swore after they had gone—but they always smiled when they returned. Whether fat or ugly, or sallow-skinned and flabby from the climate, they had an air, these women. They were, to Thi-Linh, Paris.

But they had something else, and it was that she envied them most. Prestige. Thi-Linh knew she was better looking than most of them, and that in time she also would possess clothes like theirs, but she would never ride along the Rue Catinat and be pointed out as the wife of Monsieur This or Captain That. And simply because her skin was not entirely white.

There must be some recompense, she decided; at least, revenge. But conscious revenge seemed a tedious and ineffectual effort. After all, were not they women dependent like herself upon their ability to hold men? Competition. A rivalry in which vengeance had no part except where personalities challenged it.

Nanette was right; there were distinctions in love as well as in society. Fastidiousness was an asset. In her instance, it was a score that brought her nearer the average of these Frenchwomen with all their prestige. Not that they were fastidious; she had heard that white women in the tropics spoiled swiftly. But dis-

crimination in a native woman, or a woman with native blood, gave her more power as an adversary.

And so, although four months had passed, still she rode about the city at night without answering the smiles of Frenchmen. Virtue, she realized, belied its original implications; for, instead of chastity, it meant the period of waiting before fulfilment.

And then there was that white face that had bloomed suddenly in the night and passed. . . . Chirp of scissors . . . droning tear of silk . . . and the yearning tongues of the world. . . . Nun in a cloister—waiting.

2

It was curious that upon her arrival in Saïgon she had no feeling of strangeness. Of a certainty she saw unfamiliar things, but the city itself might have been a well-remembered place that had simply been remodeled and repeopled.

She and Nanette had first rented a room in the house of a Tonkinese family that Nanette had known in Hanoi. This house was identical with all the other houses in the same row: tawny plaster, red tile roof, and green fingers of mold groping up from the lush soil.

In the daytime, naked or half-naked children played on the doorsteps. Women squatted within, gossiping, and chewing betel or smoking. In the road a low fog of dust was raised under the cumbersome wheels of

ox-drawn carts and rickshaws; coolies went soundlessly by, pale-flanked with that same dust, and bent under great bales or with bamboo carrying-poles swinging to the polished rhythm of their bare shoulders.

The barracks of the Tirailleurs Annamites was near by, and at night soldiers drifted past, slim in their dark tunics and spiked straw helmets, their soft tread augmented by the muffled rattle of occasional vehicles.

To the west a short distance a canal made an oily track for sampans and barges gliding down from Cholon, the Chinese city, to Saïgon River. To Thi-Linh that river was a source of mystery and delight.

With high tide it came sucking in from the sea, drawing men and ships. From the docks of the Messageries Maritimes to the Botanical Gardens, masts made crucifixes upon the sky, seeming hung with the blunt black smudges of smokestacks. Clustered about these foreign ships were junks from Malaya, Tonkin, and China, with eyes painted on their prows.

Frequently dead-gray battleships were moored by the Marine Barracks, to release a brood of laughing, curly-haired sailors upon Saïgon; noisy young men who rode two and three in a rickshaw, the little red pom-poms on their caps darting in all quarters of the city like a holiday of fireflies.

From the Quai Frances Garnier the long Rue Catinat slanted coolly between French and native shops to the square under the great twin spires of the cathedral.

In this street the air was always aromatic with the smells of perfumes and powders and imported wines. Gilt signs peered between the tamarinds, bearing incongruous words: Huyen-Tran, Charcutier. . . . Ly Binh, Tailleur. . . . Behind plate-glass windows that blazed under the tropical sun were the latest modes in clothing and millinery. Crowded between bijouteries and magasins were tiny shops that sold Tonkinese embroidery and brass gods, or bazaars rich with silks from China and India.

On the Rue Catinat also were the main cafés. . . . These cafés! Whenever Thi-Linh passed them they started a little throbbing in her throat. Officers and women sat at marble-topped tables in an atmosphere electric with voices. In the later afternoon, orchestras made French music; and sometimes the people danced.

Around the cathedral spread a great open space that frayed into the streets which were the blue-blooded veins of Saïgon. Here in the houses set back from these shady thoroughfares people moved in an orbit that Thi-Linh would never be permitted to enter. Here majors and colonels, civil officials and wealthy business men lived with their wives or mistresses in pale yellow plaster houses smothered in tropical luxuriance. Here the heart of France beat with almost hysterical gaiety to the surrounding measured rhythm of darker blood.

Thi-Linh found something ancient and inevitable about Saïgon; an oldness that had nothing to do with actual years but with an accumulation of experience

that seemed distilled into the streets, like the smell of wine soaked into the boards of an old table.

For that reason she was glad she had seen that white face a few days after she arrived.

It was strange how his pallor persisted in making a glow behind her thoughts. She tried to quench it, but it remained—imploring her. Imploring her to do what? To find him.

There were many officers in Saïgon, a number of whom had dark hair and who smoked opium. So how could she expect to find this man who had stood poised momentarily in the doorway that night, and thereafter stood silhouetted in her mind? And if she did find him, what then? Suppose he had a wife or a congaï? But he did not; she knew that. A man who was not terrifically alone could not have leaned out of the night so tragically and charged her to find him.

"I know a woman," Nanette announced one day before she had met her officer, "who can introduce us to some French army men. She procures girls for many lieutenants and captains, and I think her commission is not too high."

"Let us see her," Thi-Linh decided.

It proved a most unsuccessful experience. They went to see the woman, a highly perfumed, haughty creature who lived near the market, and the next day she came to their house with two non-commissioned officers. One of them was very red-faced, and a blot of sweat darkened the back of his khaki tunic. He

pinched Thi-Linh's cheeks and said she would do; she could move her things to his house the following day. She merely smiled and informed him that she desired a younger husband. Nanette laughed insolently. . . . The two Frenchmen could have struck them with pleasure, but instead they kicked their rickshaw coolies and rode off in a rage. The procuress was even angrier; she departed refusing to bring any more gentlemen to be insulted by two such strumpets.

It was then that a woman next door told Thi-Linh about the work in the store of the Bombay men. Immediately she went to see Madame Dessard, and the following day started in as a seamstress. Nanette told her she was a fool. Why should she work with her hands when she could live by her wits? A bumboat woman called Mary, who trafficked down on the river, knew all the captains and officers of the foreign ships. Often these men desired to be entertained. . . . But Thi-Linh was determined.

"I must send Mama Thi-Bao money for little Justin; sewing is easier—until I can get a suitable husband."

She thought of her baby a great deal these days. To have kissed the gurgling brownness of him would have dissolved all the inertia of these weeks of search and waiting. Her thoughts lingered tenderly upon Thi-Bao, too. And Justin; that was before she heard of his death. He could not, she realized, be blamed for the faults of his race, of his sex. The love of men was such a pitiful splendor; it came with great pomp and

ebbed so inauspiciously. Perhaps it was not the love that passed, but the resolution that made love permanent.

It was strange, this knowledge she had of men. She seemed born with an awareness of their capacities and faults.

As she cut and sewed daily under Madame Dessard it seemed as if she were taking apart her past and making it into a new model. Although the fat Frenchwoman, fussing about in her tight slippers and yielding to fits of temper, was ludicrous and sometimes irritating, Thi-Linh felt a curious sympathy for her. Son and husband consumed in one fire; and now, pathetically arrogant in her memory of them, she rode restlessly about the city at night or sat in one of the cafés, flushed and alone, until she swayed into a rickshaw and was taken to her empty little house in a lane off the Rue Paul Blanchy.

Since the first day in Saïgon Thi-Linh had expected to encounter Kim Khouan. Nanette had told her that once she had passed him coming out of the bank where he worked. "He was dressed in European clothes," she said.

It was inevitable that a meeting should occur sooner or later. When it did it was so brief and unexpected that she did not have time to lose her poise.

She was riding along the Rue Taberd when another rickshaw swooped around the corner. The two coolies cursed, and hers swerved, whirling her into the inter-

secting street, and leaving flashed upon her mind the photograph of a startled face in which the eyes seemed bruised with poignant recognition. She did not look around, although her temples felt caught in a revolving vise. A brief impression of his clothing pulsed in the heat-waves that rose about her: white suit and black tie, and a large felt hat such as Frenchmen wore. It was like seeing a familiar ghost in strange attire. She had a vague idea that he looked absurd. For an instant she seemed to drown in his dark gaze, as of old, then the sensation passed, leaving with her the feeling that she had been baptized with the blood of an old wound.

She hoped she would not see Kim Khouan again. Long ago (was it a hundred years?) she had celebrated a phantom wedding with him, and she wanted no touch of reality to draw it out of spectral security.

Sometimes in the shop she had to rip a seam and sew it again; seeing Kim Khouan was like that, a new tear in an old seam. And she had so many things to mend these days. She seemed continually basting her life and Frenchwomen's dresses. Needles and thread; cloth and scissors; and Madame Dessard fuming about with a mouthful of pins. Dull days, opaque.

Her only pleasure was at night. There were so many people astir then. People searching. Like herself. She loved to watch their forms mold patterns against the night. Not only the men's, but the women's as well. Was it wrong to love bodies? she wondered.

The priests said it was. . . . ("Blessed are the pure in heart; for they shall see God!" intoned the voice behind the curtain whenever she went to confession. "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned!" "The Lord be with you. And with thy spirit!" "I confess to Almighty God, to Blessed Mary, ever Virgin . . . that I have looked on men and wanted them, not in an evil way, but wanted them close. . . ." "Be calm and pray for strength, my child. . . .") But that was the trouble with holy men, they seemed unconscious of the beautiful importance of bodies. . . . Sweet smoke of censers, sweet musk of bodies. . . . Bodies so pliant and eager, yearning to one another. Bodies of sailors. Bodies of soldiers. Bodies of young girls calling to sailors and soldiers. Shimmering music that flowed between flesh. Like the poetry that Kim Khouan used to make. Like Justin's poetry. Like the poetry of their bodies, one flushed with gold and the other a rippling pallor. At times she felt like undulant music set to the poetry of moving forms. What was life but an immense desire, an immense yearning interpreted through bodies?

And these girls who nightly walked the Rue Catinat or rode in rickshaws . . . Yes, she understood. . . . A certain adventure in meeting strange men, seeing what they would do, what they would say. Undoubtedly these girls felt that, and it made their motives appear less evil and less a matter of necessity.

What was the difference between herself and them,

if any? Yes, there was a difference, a very subtle difference. ". . . a woman who is beautiful and clever enough to choose her temporary husbands . . . and last, the stupid little creature who sells herself indiscriminately. . . ." Clever Nanette—devilishly clever. But she, Thi-Linh, was not hunting for this man with the white face for any definite reason; he had simply hurtled against her, like a frightened bird, his very air of helplessness mysteriously commanding her to find him.

Long ago at Stung-Treng Father Mehry had told her a story of a woman who washed a man's feet in ointment and wiped them with her hair. Women, she thought, were always waiting to minister to men in just such a manner, a certain joy in the humility. Perhaps she was hunting for this man simply to wash his feet in pity. . . .

Often she hovered about the street where she had seen him. She had learned that the house was kept by a Chinaman, and Frenchmen came there sometimes for a pipe.

She knew it was useless to inquire of the proprietor, for he would disclaim any knowledge.

One night her quest led her to the gardens behind the Governor's palace. An Annamite youth slouched on the other end of the bench where she sat. Through the park, scattered lamps drowsed in the warm, sweet air, with a vortex of insects circling under each. A few women circled under them, too; women suddenly

attentive when the sound of rickshaw wheels ground the silence.

She felt the young Annamite looking at her from under his broad French hat. Presently he said:

"You do not live in Saïgon."

She regarded him suspiciously. "Why?"

A dim impression of a shrug. "If you were an old one," he told her insolently, "you would know that too many come here." Then he added: "I don't often —most of the time along the quays. . . ."

Previous to that the bruised earth-smell that rose from the damp grass had made her want to stretch and exult in her young body. Now, in an instant, she had grown old and wise, with something sick in the pit of her. She understood. . . .

She studied the boy with contempt; the instinct of rivalry disguised.

He was a slim-loined fellow, clad in loose white trousers and only a coat, with his sandaled feet drawn up under him and clasped in encircling arms.

A pity for his youth crept through her resentment.

He drew out cigarettes and offered her one. She refused; he lighted his with lithe, swift movements, tossing the match deliberately into the sweet-smelling grass.

Thi-Linh considered him gravely now, caught in a curiosity that was half fear. "Do you know many of the French officers?" she forced herself to ask.

He nodded in a drift of smoke. "Many."

Suddenly she was angry; the curiosity had become all fear. "Do you know one—I don't know his name—with black hair and a very white face—who sometimes smokes opium at the little house on the Rue Ormay?"

He looked at her intently for a moment. "No," he said. Then: "Why do you want to know?"

Something forced her to go on although she felt vaguely ashamed. "I want to know—his name."

"Why?"

Thi-Linh did not answer. The boy was still studying her.

"You have seen him—you like him?" he guessed.

Finally she answered, "Yes."

He laughed. "Perhaps I might find him for you." She did not speak and he fell silent. "He is handsome, you say?" he interrogated after a moment. He moved closer. In the dimness his face looked extremely pale; she realized it was powder. "Describe him again," he said.

She told him reluctantly of the figure in the doorway, wondering why she did. The boy nodded.

"Come back tomorrow night about this time," he enjoined. "Maybe . . ."

Thi-Linh rose. Suddenly she wanted to hurry away, for she felt that she had profaned a secret.

"Don't forget—tomorrow night," he called after her.

She returned the next night and waited for more

than an hour. Of course he did not come; she was a fool to have believed he would come.

The experience left her feeling soiled. What was the use of waiting? All this searching in the night through streets and parks was becoming sordid. In some inexplicable way it seemed as though she were prostituting herself. Before, she had moved through the days and nights with destination, in the midst of life, but remote, untouched. Now her immunity seemed perforated. To her, virtue was not in loin but in purity of purpose. If that purpose was threatened, then what? . . . ("Blessed are the pure in heart. . . ." droned the voice in the box every time she went to confession. "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned—or have I sinned? . . . Can a woman be a prostitute without giving herself actually, but simply moving in the midst of people and feeling their desires? And wanting someone terrifically—not his body—but him—and searching through evil for it?" "Be calm and pray for strength, my child. . . ." Words that explained nothing. . . .) And each evening the girls on the Rue Catinat; the painted boys. The cool smells of wine; the lights; and the flutter of bodies against them. Hearts beating, eyelids beating; people themselves beating; beating softly with the rhythmic darkness. . . .

And then that night on the Rue Paul Blanchy. She was wandering aimlessly and she had dropped down upon the curbing, tired and hot. A rickshaw stopped

by a lane; in it a fat woman who stooped and put on her shoes, and then got out. In the light from a distant street-lamp the coolie's shoulders gleamed with thick strength. A white hand hovered for a moment on those gleams. . . . After Madame Dessard had hurried into the lane and the coolie went springing off down the street, all muscle and shimmer, Thi-Linh felt nauseated. . . . Son and husband in a single blaze; now the lonely nights of riding, sitting at a table over empty bottles. Madame Dessard who never had a Frenchman. . . . White hand hovering on a gleam of shoulders. . . . Thi-Linh seemed filled with an accumulation of lust.

Perhaps Nanette's way was the best. Nanette had lost no time. Through a friend she had heard of a lieutenant who desired companionship. For three weeks now she had been living with him in a house on the Rue Paul Blanchy; happily, Nanette said. She came often to see Thi-Linh.

Staying with the Tonkinese family was getting on Thi-Linh's nerves. She did not like to see the stains of betel-juice all over the floor; and living with Justin had spoiled her for native food and sleeping on a mat. And the crying children! The insects in the unscreened house! The smells from the street!

Then came the letter from her mother telling of Justin's death. In her little trunk was a copy of "Une Fille d'Annam," wrapped in an old khaki shirt that she had taken when she left. She did not cry, but

she got out the book and her fingers caressed the pages, and then she held the old shirt close, breathing deep the faint smell of his sweat that still clung to it. . . .

Wedded to a phantom of Kim Khouan, loving the memory of Justin, seeking a nameless white face. Fealty to each. Could it be, she wondered, that there were some women who temperamentally were the perpetual brides of many?

So why wait? If she waited too long she would be soiled.

At the docks were ships, and in them swartly beautiful men from Europe or great blond men from a colder hemisphere.

Indeed, why wait?

Scissors cutting cloth, and the flash of needles. Bombay men unfurling silks. Madame Dessard thumping women with a thimble, and complaining that her feet swelled; Madame Dessard who never had a Frenchman. And then night. Roads cutting the dusk, and the flash of lamps. Girls unfurling bodies. Darkness thumping the city with its rhythm, and white men complaining that the heat made their desires swell; white men who wanted wives. Rip and sew; rip and sew. Tedious garments of day and night.

Thi-Linh felt that she was being sewn into a bag that was suffocating her.

And then one night, riding past the hot brilliance of one of the hotels, she saw a familiar white profile against the blur of lamps and faces.

For a moment a hand seemed to hold back her heart-beat.

She stopped the rickshaw at the corner, and standing on the opposite side of the street by a stall where a Chetti sold cigarettes, she gazed at the white face which alone seemed stationary in all that quiver of lights and people.

An inclosing-rail shut in the café proper; below it, on the sidewalk, were other tables, all filled. At one of them he sat in company with two other officers. She could make out the insignia of captain. There was a frail slimness about him that hurt her; and when he smiled, as he did often, the insolence of that expression seemed to mock his own physical weakness. Slender legs crossed and uncrossed under the table. He smoked incessantly, clouding his sharp profile and sheening black hair. When he was not smoking he was drinking. He seemed afraid—afraid to relax.

Thi-Linh understood. He had been ill. For a moment she suffered acutely at the thought of that white body hot with fever.

Back and forth she walked. The Indian in the cigarette stall smiled impudently. This waiting wrenched her dignity. But it would be over soon, she told herself triumphantly.

It was late when the two officers at his table rose to go, and she was limp from standing so long. All three shook hands, then he moved indecisively toward

the corner. Instantly a group of rickshaw men, squatting in the shafts in the broad plaza, rushed at him.

Quickly Thi-Linh signaled a coolie.

He had got into a rickshaw and was turning into the narrow street that ran between the hotel and the opera-house.

As she jolted along after him, cold at her fingertips, a lurking form parted from the gloom of the theater and broke into a swift run in front of her, following the other rickshaw. There was something reminiscent in the lithe frailty of that runner.. Suddenly she knew.

She kicked the coolie in the back, urging him faster.

The officer's rickshaw had turned into the Rue Paul Blanchy, and the running figure took refuge in the darkness of the sidewalk, following almost parallel with the Frenchman. How could she stop him without attracting the man in the rickshaw? He must not meet her on the streets, this captain.

The runner turned a pale oval over his shoulder. Evidently he saw her, perhaps recognized her, for he faltered.

Quickly Thi-Linh directed her coolie to the curb; instructed him to wait. Springing out, she ran toward the boy who, after a momentary pause, darted across the street and into an intersecting thoroughfare.

The Frenchman's rickshaw rattled on up the Rue Paul Blanchy.

Thi-Linh followed the boy. He slackened his pace,

and then he halted and turned to face her defiantly. She stopped, breathless. He was dressed the same as that night in the park.

"Well?" he demanded, but there was fear in his bravado.

Thi-Linh forced herself to be cool. "What is his name?"

The boy hesitated. "I was going to find you and tell you," he muttered, his voice jerking for want of breath. "But he has been sick, and—"

"A lie," she interposed quietly. "What is his name?"

Again the boy hesitated. "Lehrisson—Captain Paul Lehrisson."

For a moment she wondered whether she should strike him or not; then she drew a few coins from the pocket of her tunic, flung them at him, and walked back toward the Rue Paul Blanchy.

Once more, she felt, the events of her life marched with destination.

3

It had all come about so simply since that night of waiting outside the hotel. In retrospect, only one incident seemed offensive to her; that was when she went to the haughty creature who had brought the two non-commissioned officers, and bribed her heavily to approach Captain Lehrisson. Captain Lehrisson came. "What is your name?" he had asked; and when

she replied he murmured, "Marie Linh—mmm—I like it." And his smile seemed to add, "You are the one I have been looking for." How frail he looked, standing there that afternoon in the sunlight, with a terrific glow of restlessness seeming visible under his almost transparent skin!

Two days later she went to live in his house.

This house was tawny-yellow and tiled like most of the houses in Saïgon, with the same irregular scallops of green mold spreading upward from its base. The garden was wildly overgrown. Traveler-palms leaned on the warm air above turbulent growths torn by bristling agaves and other thorny-leaved plants. This same neglect was visible within, as though the house as well as the garden shared the luxuriant disorder of its master.

Unlike Justin, there was nothing enigmatic about Paul. Very soon she learned that he liked to believe himself master of all that surrounded him. But in this he did not differ from most men, except that in him the trait was peculiarly apparent.

He had an air of experience that pleased her. Life had used him, and in using him had traded a sophisticated grace for the freshness of youth. Used. That was it. Paul looked used. But he did not have an appearance of dissipation. "Asceticism," he remarked to her once with that charming smile of his, "is profligacy of restraint." Men like Paul rarely looked dissipated; they believed too thoroughly in their philos-

ophy of voluptuousness ever to admit that doubt which reflects excess in the physiognomy.

He could not give her the allowance that Justin had given her, and often he complained about the small pay of a captain. Whenever he talked of money he was extremely irritable. Thi-Linh wanted to buy French clothes, but he said she looked better in Annamite dress; which she suspected was his way of telling her he could not afford it. She was disappointed. Yet it did not affect her feeling toward Paul. He was, she realized, the type to which women give instinctively, expecting little in return.

Very quickly she learned the routine of his habits. She had his uniform ready every morning when he rose. Most Frenchmen, she had heard, took their baths cold; Paul liked his water tepid. He drank a cocktail before déjeuner and brandy-soda afterward. He was very nervous in the heat of the day, and when his house-boy did not obey quickly or made some mistake, he kicked him. With nightfall a certain calm seemed to stroke his tortured restlessness. Immediately after dinner (he ate very little) she prepared his opium-pipe. Usually he took four, sometimes six. He smoked on a great pile of pillows in the living-room, his eyes heavy with a drowsy sweetness. He looked like a little boy lying there, so white against the black pillows. Almost every night he went out with his friends. What they did she did not know, nor did she ask.

Poor Paul! His body was an instrument attuned to emotions at times too violent for him to sustain. Moods traveled over him with the swiftness of electricity, fusing him with brief exultation or despair, and leaving him blasted, like a dead circuit. Generally he was so careless and laughing—and uncertain. Then, suddenly, a dazed introspection would cloud his eyes, as though he saw things that puzzled and depressed him. Frenchmen, she had learned, liked to think about what they called "Life." Usually this was not an entirely pleasant occupation. Evidently that was what Paul was thinking about when that introspective look came into his eyes.

He was very jealous. When she told him about Justin he looked extremely angry and sulked until the next day. She asked him nothing about himself; it was not wise to ask men about themselves. Not that it would have mattered what he told her. Women would always call Paul's sins indiscretions, and even the greatest offense to the vanity, infidelity, would be forgiven him because of his boyish laugh. Men who laughed like Paul, she realized, would always be the sons of their wives and mistresses.

There was a piano in the house. He swore at it and the climate every time he touched it. But Thi-Linh, who enjoyed the metallic vibrance of Annamite orchestras, thought its music beautiful. Weeks would pass when he did not play; then he would sit down, browse over the discolored keys and break into music

that pounded the air into fury. When Paul played, all that sultry discontent seemed to rush out of his fingers into the piano and leave him exhausted but happy.

At times, particularly after he had been smoking opium, he would drop down beside her and press his face close to her, holding her tight in a shuddering ecstasy of helplessness. Often when he came in late he would wake her, as though there was something reassuring in the sight of her eyes upon him.

There were many books in the house, but Paul rarely took them off their shelves. Thi-Linh, however, read most of the day. Once she was indiscreet enough to show Paul her copy of "Une Fille d'Annam," and he threw it out of the window. Thereafter she locked it in her trunk.

She decided that her position as congaï of a captain merited a change in her appearance. She had always worn her hair parted and pulled straight over her ears, with a knot at the back. But now she arranged it "à la Tonkinoise," twisted into a single strand and drawn through a black silk sheath wrapped about her head turbanwise.

"You look like the women on the piastre notes," said Nanette when she saw this change of coiffure.

She saw Nanette often. Frequently in the late afternoon they would hire a carriage and ride along the Rue Catinat to the quays and return by the Botanical Gardens. This was the usual route taken by social

Saïgon after a hot day. Those rides seemed to bring Thi-Linh closer to that uniformed, gaily dressed world which, after nightfall, danced and sat in the open-air cafés.

The passing carriages were occupied by Frenchwomen who stared contemptuously; native nurses pulling at the clothes of sallow little boys and girls who climbed all over the cushioned seats; and officials, resplendent in white twill and gold braid, seated beside their wives.

The sight of all those Frenchwomen, fashionably dressed and riding along with conscious superiority, made Thi-Linh resentful and dissatisfied. Beneath that surface envy was a calm conviction of equality—perhaps more than that—together with a spiteful exultation in the knowledge that many Frenchmen admitted, of course only among themselves, the ascendant virtues of native women.

But her delight in those rides was not in the fact that she mingled superficially with Frenchwomen, returning disdain for disdain, but in the streets, rinsed in shade and thick with the treacle of voices. At that hour people, no longer contracted with heat, seemed to release an almost perceptible fragrance, like flowers that unseal at dusk. It was then, in the midst of people, that the warm hands of life slipped into her and stroked her softly. She, too, seemed to give out an attar. At times it was almost terrifying, this sense of giving out. With a feeling of physical anguish she

seemed to yearn toward those figures eddying away in the dusk.

One afternoon Nanette appeared in a soft pink frock; high-heeled French slippers glimmered on her restless feet; and her large hat had roses on it. Thi-Linh thought she looked like a Frenchwoman drowned in sunburn and then powdered white.

"Why doesn't Paul buy you clothes like this?" Nanette asked.

"He thinks I look better in Annamite dress," Thi-Linh lied.

Nanette surveyed her critically, then said, a shade too sweetly, "Perhaps you do, my infant."

That night Thi-Linh asked Paul again if he would not get her a European dress. For an instant he looked annoyed, then smiled and said he was in debt that month, but next month she could buy whatever she wanted. She knew next month he would still be in debt. But she said nothing. In a little box in her room were a few piastres she had saved; she would add to them, and in a few months, perhaps, she could get a dress like Nanette's.

The rainy season had come, and Paul spent most of his evenings at home. Or, after dark, they would get a carriage and ride. But she preferred the nights in the house: rain sounding light hoofs upon the roof; through the windows, lightning throbbing down a dark pulse of the sky; and the faint smell of opium and pomade that hung about Paul. He seemed less

discontented those nights. Sometimes he played for her, not the savage music of his black moods, but little French songs that bantered with the silence and left haunting smiles in their wake. In turn, she played the guitar for him.

One night after she had sung a Cambodian chanson he lay on the pile of cushions gazing at her thoughtfully for a long while.

"*Forget this affair, oh, my friend,*" the words ran; "*it is but a little flutter of my heart. . . .*"

Finally he said: "Wise counsel."

And a dart of dread stung her as, when living with Justin, she had seen that distant, dreaming look in his eyes.

"How do your people learn so much wisdom, Marie?" he asked. Then as an afterthought he added inconsiderately, "But I forget you have French blood."

His thoughtful mood continued. "'*It is but a little flutter of my heart,*'" he quoted. "But isn't all love that?"

"The love of Frenchmen?" she could not help saying.

He paid no attention to the question. "You native women are so sensible about the whole thing," he went on. "French women haven't learned to believe in inevitability. We men come and go, marry and leave, and you women continue as though nothing had happened."

How little he knew! So arrogantly blind. But one thing he had said was true. Belief in inevitability.

His eyes focused directly upon her.

"You, Marie, you have a secret that I doubt if you recognize." He smiled, a little bitterly. "I envy you it. I don't believe there is a thing you do that you think is wrong. Is there?"

"But what do I do that *is* wrong?" she asked.

He shrugged. "The Church requires a wedding. . . ." Then he smiled again. "But don't try to understand. You have it, this secret; don't spoil it. Listen, Marie,"—he bent forward—"when you hear people say that a certain individual has no conscience don't believe them; what they really mean is that that individual doesn't believe in evil."

She had never heard him talk in this manner before; it surprised and puzzled her.

He became silent, staring into distance beyond her. Then he said:

"You people of the East have something . . . something that makes living easier. What is it?"

"Years," she answered involuntarily, wondering why she said it and what it meant.

Suddenly she had a feeling of mysterious expansion and dilution into air. The poignant swell of her seemed to mount the night, circling in widening ripples, until she felt that she enclosed the entire world in the womb of her.

Paul got up and went to the piano, and a violent shattering of chords splintered against the silence, as though he were flinging something impotent and furi-

ous out of himself into the mystery of this country that to him was alien and a land of exile.

Poor Paul! A dweller in three worlds. . . . The brooding world of his discontent; the world in which he lived with her; and that world in which he mingled with official and social Saïgon.

It was the last sphere that troubled her. She was mistress in the world where he and she dwelt together, and she could even penetrate that lower darkness into which his inflammable temperament plunged him at intervals. But the other was forbidden. She saw it as though looking at some exotic form of life enacted noiselessly behind a glass pane; a life in which Paul participated, returning to her with rumors of what those soundlessly moving figures said and did. Often, stifled with helplessness, something seemed to cry out down in the silence of her. Just to wear French clothes and sit with Paul at one of those tables in the sidewalk cafés! And then she would grow calm, reassured by the feeling of destination that traveled with her. I shall do it, she thought, perhaps not with him but with another.

After the rains Paul spent much of his time in that world. Duties at the barracks. Tea at the home of some official's wife. Evenings in the cafés. Weekend parties at Cap St. Jacques. When he returned to her (like a man returning from a long journey, she thought) she would have to cool his restlessness. He complained about money. Yet he did not try to save.

He took ten, often fifteen pipes of opium a day. There was something stark about him; his vitality crackled from day to day, like a bare live wire snapping with high tension.

Finally he came down with fever. For two weeks she nursed him while he swore at the climate, the country, and at her. But always after he was irritable he would moisten her hands with tears; those cool hands that seemed to lift the burn from his forehead. When he clung like that, so tragically, so repentant, she had a feeling reminiscent of those days just before little Justin was born.

The fever passed. During his convalescence he was very gentle. It was as though the sickness had softened his disposition. How white and used he looked, lying there against the white pillows, with his black hair and eyes seeming the only features that lifted one pallor from the other! He laughed much during his convalescence; that laugh which would always make him the son of his women.

4

Saïgon moved to a military cadence that vaguely excited Thi-Linh.

Many barracks faced the shaded streets. At certain hours sentinels marched in front of them, and at all times brown troops lounged and chattered within, visible through open doors and windows. In front of

the Marine Barracks, on the Quai Francis Garnier, sailors slouched or drilled until at night a bugle sent them to their bunks.

Through the day officers could be seen moving languidly about the Government buildings; very official-looking men in khaki uniforms, with black braid and gold on their collars, and white helmets. At night they did not look so official. Many of them wore white then, and rode through the streets in rickshaws or sat in the cafés, smoking and drinking.

Sometimes they were very ribald, these officers. Usually that was when a number gathered about a table in the Hotel de la Rotonde, and shouted mad songs over glasses that were filled and refilled. The French were very noisy about their singing, Thi-Linh thought.

Whenever a battleship was in, the quays were alive with the sensual stirrings of sailors ashore. At night, the port-holes were gongs that sounded the throbbing of bands playing for officers and Frenchwomen. Thi-Linh often passed these ships while soirées were pulsing against their steel flanks, and it always made her unhappy. It would be pleasant to know how to dance, and to swirl about in the arms of a young naval officer. Something forbidden and sweet about those gray-dark battleships.

Frequently, after sunset, the lamp-hung streets rippled with the cries of bugles.

On certain days files of rifles flashed a challenge to

the sun in the great square behind the cathedral. Generally that was to celebrate the visit of some general or official. Long lines of helmeted shadows lay slanting on the ground, to jerk in unison as barrels resounded with the thud of brown hands and butts crashed to earth.

But the gayest day of all came in July when the French celebrated the fall of an old prison in Paris. On this day flags unfurled in the Rue Catinat, and the burning pavements echoed the rhythmic steps of sweaty columns. That review surpassed any other. Monsieur le Gouverneur was there, with his staff; and crowds of civilians. A serried panorama of khaki, creased with the glint of rifles, formed a background for sabres that suddenly became whirring flames; and white-mustached generals pinned decorations upon officers and kissed them. Always the brazen flood of "La Marseillaise" drenched those scenes.

Thi-Linh came to know quite a few officers. Paul had many friends, and sometimes he invited several to dine at the house. She always sat at the table with them, and she enjoyed it; for the conversation was very gay, and there was much wine. These officers seemed pleased, and a bit surprised, when she could discuss recent novels from France and affairs of the day. She observed, after a while, a certain tolerant respect in their attitudes. When she passed one of them in the street he would touch his helmet smilingly and say, "Bon jour, Madame Marie!"

When these officers came to dine she put on her best tunic, and Paul seemed quite proud of her. It was an advance, she told herself, to have these men acknowledge her intelligence; and it was something that Nanette, with all her French dresses, could not boast of.

Several times Paul's colonel dined with them. Whenever he came he was the only guest. He was such a fatherly-looking man, with soft silver hair and the sheen of powder on his reddish face, as though he had shaved only a few minutes before. She did not object when he tilted her chin and told her she was a lovely little creature. So fatherly. . . . He seemed very fond of Paul. He had, she learned, known his mother.

Once he talked to her quite seriously about Paul while he was out of the room. He asked her if Paul was kind to her and if she did not think "the climate was getting him," as he put it. So kind, this colonel! A guardian air over Paul. Even over her. There were Frenchmen like that. Usually they were old.

"Perhaps," he said one night jocularly, "some day Paul may be a major. How would you like that, Marie?"

She did not know how she would like that. But she smiled at the colonel. With higher rank came higher aspirations. Perhaps a French wife. But these thoughts did not make her painfully uneasy, as they would have done while she was living with Jus-

tin. She was surer of herself now. A greater belief in—in inevitability.

The colonel's wife was in France. But she was coming out to join him when the cooler season started. There would be no guardian air about her. She was probably very fat and powdered, and dressed in silk that rustled too much. Thi-Linh knew the type. Always perspiring under their powder, which made them look a little untidy. They invariably talked very loudly, these women; and they called Indo-China "exile." Although they wore no insignia, they always commanded the regiment. Sometimes they had affairs with younger officers. . . . Perhaps the colonel would be sorry when the cooler weather began.

Nanette came to call often, and her visits left Thi-Linh vaguely dissatisfied. She never lost an opportunity to tell what her lieutenant had given her. Thi-Linh no longer envied Nanette her French manner, for she knew she had that air herself. Moreover, she was aware that she had a dignity that Nanette could never acquire. But she did envy her the clothes she wore. It was very strange, Thi-Linh reflected, that women whose intelligence commanded the respect of men were never indulged as much as women who were very superficial.

She supposed it was because men thought they were too sensible to want much.

One day Nanette brought the news that Kim Khouan had a daughter. "I met his wife's sister on the street,"

she announced, "you know that stupid creature, and she told me."

Thi-Linh's heart always felt rimmed with a little chill when she heard of Kim Khouan. Every week or so after that first encounter she had passed him on the street, and each time a dark gush seemed to well up and leave her trembling inside for several hours. He never spoke, but the anguished recognition in his eyes smote harder than words. She always affected a distant smile. Lately she had perfected that smile.

"Moreover," Nanette went on, "Kim Khouan does not work in the bank any longer."

Thi-Linh knew that she was trying to make her unhappy. She had never told Nanette that Justin was Kim Khouan's son, but she was convinced that she knew. Women like Nanette had a way of knowing things.

"He was very inefficient," Nanette continued deliberately. "So he was dismissed. Now he is in the Tirailleurs Annamites."

Kim Khouan in a uniform! Something in that picture caused a warmth to rush over Thi-Linh. Brown body molding into brown cloth; the flex and sway of him as he carried a rifle. Kim Khouan moving to the sound of bugle and drum; pacing up and down in front of the barracks; or lounging inside with other soldiers.

"His father knew some official," Nanette amplified, "so he was made a *doi* in the army. And he doesn't

have to drill very much because he does clerical work at headquarters." She laughed. "He always did get out of things easily," she said.

Suddenly Thi-Linh was possessed of a fierce desire to see her son. And Mama Thi-Bao. She would ask Paul if she could visit them. Of course he would complain about the money.

But to her surprise Paul did not complain about the money when she asked if she could go to Stung-Treng.

"Next month," he said, "you may go."

Paul had changed lately. It was not often now that he struck the piano into the mad crescendoes of his restlessness. All the hot chaos of him seemed submerged in a hazy contentment. He was like a man dreaming behind a fog, satisfied to view the world thus obscurely because life was robbed of its jagged corners.

In trying to understand this change, it occurred to her that it might be the result of his increasing habit of opium smoking. If it was, then she could see no wrong in it. Opium did not hurt men—unless they took too much. Many Annamites used it as Frenchmen smoked cigarettes; the King of Cambodia, she had heard, took forty pipes a day, and he had attained a venerable age.

One evening Paul came in very disturbed. In Europe, he told her, an Austrian archduke had been assassinated.

5

And now Saïgon moved to a military cadence that mounted like savage drums.

France at war—France at war. Words spun like knives in the hands of experts. So much talk about France, the Mother, and Indo-China, her adopted child. It was as if the engraving on the piastre notes had come to life: France, the Protectress, embodied in a big-jointed woman wearing a cap, with her arms affectionately about an Annamite girl and boy.

Now when the files of rifles flashed a challenge in the great square behind the cathedral a blue intensity seemed to leap from barrel to barrel.

"Allons, enfants de la patrie. . . ." Brazen flood of "La Marseillaise" drenching the Rue Catinat.

Drums laughed frenziedly in the tamarind-lined streets. Streets that were like white veins flung out by the sun to plunge its fury deeper into earth. Streets striped with marching figures. Figures that sang lustily.

"Le jour de gloire est arrivé . . . contre nous de la tyrannie . . ."

Steel flanks quivered against the Quai Francis Garnier, like the flanks of runners before a signal. And within those flanks, down in the groin of them, men talked, talked, talked, until at night the lighted portholes beat like gongs.

"L'étendard sanglant est levé. . . ."

Tin soldiers were electrified into life in the midst of glare and green-lacquer trees, drilling at toy warfare over ground that raised a film of dust like gunpowder. Dry, parched ground that had felt the pigmy excitement of so many men preparing to fight. Ancient ground that made all this hysteria seem futile and childish.

Now those officers with black braid and gold on their collars hurried about the government buildings. At night when they rode in rickshaws they had a tired, nervous air; and when they gathered around the tables in the hotels their songs clashed like sabres.

"Entendez-vous dans ces campagnes. . . ."

A group of young Annamites, gathered in a back room where words whirled and crashed, were surprised by the gendarmes. All were thrust into prison, and two were shot.

The tricolor waved frantically.

"Mugir ces féroces soldats? . . ."

In the cathedral priests intoned. "Take this the Body and Blood of Christ. . . ." France recited an echo: "Take this the Body and Blood of France, Annamites, . . . the sweet sacrament whereby you become Civilized, body and soul. . . ."

Precious communion of blood. Baptism by fire. The glorious oneness of Republic. The deathless trinity of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. Brothers white and brown. Comrades in arms. Come and die, Annamites! Wrist to wrist you shall bleed with French-

men, until the darkness is purged out of you, and in death your pallor shall be chaste as the fleur-de-lis! Sweet burial that is the birth of brotherhood! Death that is the marriage of races!

Civilization is spinning on a flame. Forget those jests of white men who called you niggers. Forget their bastards who ferment your purity! It is the way of them, to joke like that. This Civilization is yours! It has given you Government and God! So up, Annamites! Tremble with hate for the enemies of France! Fill your bellies with the wine of it! Let your thighs run limp with the venom of it! They will rape your women, they will make armies of your men, they will rob you of your lands! The tablets of your Ancestors and the crests of France are one! Listen to the drums! Beating—beating. Let them fill your veins! Let them swell to the rupture of drums! Let them burst in the splendor of death for freedom! Sing, Annamites, sing! "Madelon!" Red music of marching men. Sing, brothers, sing! All together now, in one voice:

"Aux armes, citoyens! Formez vos bataillons! Marchons, marchons!"

Words like knives in the hands of experts. Thi-Linh felt them thud and quiver about her.

6

She lived in a tense present. Paul would go now. She had seen it in the haggard expectation that filled his eyes. All that snapping and crackling had gone out of him; he sagged.

One morning when she thought he was at the barracks she found him lying limply on the mound of black pillows in the living-room. As she entered he sat up and smiled in an attempt at casual good humor.

"I am going on a mission to Phnom-Penh," he announced. She breathed a sigh of relief. He noticed it and added: "But I may get orders to leave for France any day."

It was wrenching and cruel to think of Paul in the midst of fighting, the pathetic whiteness of him, the marble smoothness of him blurred by gunpowder, and bayonets and shells darting at the soft moths of his hands, at his eyes and lips. Paul, who laughed like a boy. Whose groping toward her was like the groping of little Justin. Paul, who was so used by life, so sophisticated and helpless.

In that moment she could have opened her veins for him.

"I will be in Phnom-Penh only a few days," he said.

There followed a silence. Suddenly he caught her wrist and drew her down beside him. He had a way of moving one persuasively, and very deftly.

"Marie," he began, "do you want me to go away—to France?"

"Of course not, Paul," she answered solemnly.

"You're a pretty thing, Marie," he said irrelevantly, running his fingers lightly over the bandeau of her hair. "You should go far—farther than I can take you."

"I am contented," she told him. Then she added: "The colonel said you might be a major—some day."

He looked at her sharply as she said that. Then he smiled. "It's the colonel I want to talk to you about."

She waited, but he lay there against her in silence. Presently he disengaged himself and went to the window. Standing, back to her, with the sunlight glowing about him, the whiteness of him thickened into a sharp silhouette.

"Marie," he commenced, turning, "it is possible that I may not be sent to France."

"Yes, Paul?"

"It all depends on the colonel," he announced.

Her mind was whirling like a disk, and her intuition wrote swift sentences upon it. "You think if you speak to him," she said, "or if—"

His expression of surprise relaxed into a smile. "You're a sharp little creature, Marie."

"You want me to ask him?"

He dropped beside her and took her hands. "He likes you," Paul began tentatively. "He might . . ."

His words seemed to slant against her like cold

rain. They made something wrinkle under her flesh. Paul, too, feared for the pathetic whiteness of himself. . . . Those moths of hands were beating against the thought of battle. . . . Why, she wondered suddenly, had Paul ever become a soldier? But, looking at the grace of him in that tight uniform, the answer was evident.

"He might be inclined to—well, to do something about it," he finished. "There will have to be some officers here," he took up quickly. "I could be transferred. I've always managed my men well—they like me—I speak the language. . . . Of course I myself couldn't say anything. It would be taken for—cowardice."

Cowardice. She repeated the word to herself. Paul wasn't afraid as most men would be afraid; it wasn't fear of death, it was concern over the pathetic whiteness of himself, the marble smoothness—horror of the destruction of it. Paul exulting in his flesh. Paul desiring to be used by life until he was exhausted. She understood, and it was because she did that his words slanted against her like cold rain.

"You could see him—tomorrow—after I have gone," he suggested. "Then, if he agreed, I could stay here—with you—always—and you would be taken care of—"

It was a little thoughtless of him to put it that way, she reflected. But Paul was thoughtless. Always.

"Will you go, Marie?" he asked.

Something seemed to flicker out of his eyes and cling to her. That look made her forgive him for his tactlessness.

She was always forgiving Paul.

"Will you?" he repeated.

He had told her she would go far—farther than he could take her. Perhaps it was part of that rise to do this for him. Poor Paul! She must preserve the white beauty of him.

The next day she sent a note to the colonel asking when she could see him. He replied immediately by one of his men that she could come to his house just after déjeuner.

He received her in a large white hall that glowed with the reflection of sunlight filtering through fiber shades. How fatherly he looked, with that silver hair and the sheen of powder on his reddish face! With that guardian air he motioned her into a chair and sat down behind a polished desk that swam with his reflection.

She began with a little beating in the veins of her neck: of course he knew how she loved Paul—

He nodded in that fatherly manner.

"Where is Paul?" he demanded suddenly. "Oh, I remember. . . ."

It was dreadful that he might have to go to France, she resumed. Her eyelids were lowered and the little throbs in her throat seemed to run up and melt white against them. With so many officers, she asked, was

it necessary for him to go? There would be work to be done in Indo-China. She knew that often officers were transferred; could not this be done in Paul's case? Perhaps he would be angry with her for asking, but she could not help it.

"You are fond of Paul," she finished. "And Paul is very happy with me. If he goes away . . ."

The colonel listened attentively, gently tapping the polished table—staring at his own reflection. So kindly. As though he were listening to his own daughter.

"Mmmm," he murmured when she had finished.

Of course Paul did not know she had come, she said.

Of course, he repeated.

In the long silence before he spoke again all the clotted hush seemed to press about her and spread upon her eyelids like those white throbs.

"Mmmm," he murmured again. "This is a serious matter. It could be done, yes . . . but . . . Well, I shall have to think." He paused. "Perhaps," he began, and cleared his throat; "perhaps we might talk this over more fully—I am very busy now—we might talk it over tonight—if you will come?"

As he looked at her questioningly, with that fatherly air, all those white throbs seemed to merge into one great pulsation that smote her eyes. When the blindness cleared she saw his face—so fatherly. A guardian air. Just as if he were talking to his own daughter.

How absurd to have thought that! Those kindly eyes. Eyes of a father.

She was on her feet.

Yes, she would come.

7

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. . . ."

"The Lord be with you. . . ."

"I confess to Almighty God, and to you, Father, that I have committed a grave offense. . . ."

"The Lord listens to those who sincerely are penitent. . . ."

"While belonging to one, Father, I have given myself to another. . . ."

"Willingly, my child?"

"Willingly, Father."

"Tell me all, He will hear and condone. . . ."

". . . That is all, Father."

"The Lord is lenient with those heartily sorry for their transgressions. . . . For this sin make this act of contrition. . . ."

"Almighty God, it is most grievous to me that I have offended against Thee. . . ."

"O Lord, have mercy upon this child. . . ."

8

Looking back, it seemed to Thi-Linh there were many things she had always known. The surface in-

cidents of life were surprising, unexpected, but never life itself.

She had known beforehand how it would be when Paul was transferred. Now everything that happened had an air of familiarity; a tiring little air that made her feel very old.

Among those books which filled the shelves of Paul's house and which he never read was one called "Katharsis." She had to reread parts before she understood them. Katharsis—the purging of the heart. It was not like the Nibbana of the Buddhists. Nibbana was the ultimate Nothingness, wherein lay everything, to which the individual contracted as the impurities of pride, jealousy, earthly love—in short, all emotion ebbed from his being. Nibbana was the needle's eye through which the thread of life passed in order to enter permanently into the universal design. But Katharsis was the purifying of the body to live. It was part of this Greek philosophy that one could be cleansed by excess. Experience the purgative of evil. It seemed most logical. To her, there was something pernicious in the ascetic cult that sought Nibbana, that washed the flesh of desire and left it, spiced and in shining death-cloths, to become ashes in an enveloping oneness. To Thi-Linh, Katharsis meant living; Nibbana, dying.

Through her Paul accomplished his Katharsis. Purging his own excesses by strength of another.

From the tempestuous experiences of living, bruised

by the impact of their pain and sordidness, he turned to her with perfect assurance. The pole on which he gravitated. She wondered if he knew it; it would hurt his race pride if he did. Yet all his weaknesses, his doubts and vanities dissolved in her. It was her ability to give instinctively, and without words or analysis, that made it possible. He seemed to flow into her and say: "I am cleansed, I am strong." Katharsis in the depthless reservoir of her capacity to enfold.

She did not love Paul as she had loved Kim Khouan, nor as she had loved Justin. Yet she opened her veins for him—which she had not done for either of the others.

Forgiving Paul was a habit—like religion. For a number of years she had gone to confession in the cathedral. It was a ritual behind which lay the Mystery that was God. She knew it was only a ritual, but continued practice had surrounded it with a certain superstition. And to overlook Paul's thoughtlessness and weakness was a ritual that she repeated automatically. Back of it was the Mystery of why she did it, hidden like the priest in the confessional-box.

It was nearly a year since he had gone on the mission to Phnom-Penh. Every day now he sat in a little room that was the antechamber of the Governor's office and interviewed those seeking audience with his Excellency. Or he read and wrote official

documents. Or moved quickly at the summons of a bell. He had any number of clerks and orderlies under him. Often he dined with his Excellency. Captain Lehrisson, aide-de-camp of Monsieur le Gouverneur de Cochin-Chine. It was a very flattering post. Thi-Linh was proud that he had it; proud with a little tired feeling under her heart.

Saïgon only sounded an echo of the hoofs of war now.

Nanette's lieutenant had gone to France. She was living with the Tonkinese family again, restless and dissatisfied. Desirable husbands were scarce. Soon after her lieutenant left she went to Hai-Phong with a sea-captain, but in a few weeks she returned, smiling in that sophisticated manner and explaining nothing.

And Kim Khouan had gone. Gone to France. Kim Khouan so brown in his brown uniform. Marching in brown mud now. When Thi-Linh thought of it she too seemed to be marching in mud. Mud that clung and pulled her naked feet back into the softness of it. She had seen pictures of the battlefields; stretches of mud that oozed even in the photographs. Mud with columns of smoke sliding over it, men and guns sliding over it. Or bare flats of mud in which smoke, men, and guns had been absorbed. The ooze of that mud slunk along her limbs when she looked at those pictures. The mud in which Kim Khouan marched, so brown, and spangled with sweat.

She did not go down to the quai when the Tirail-

leurs Annamites sailed. Once she had seen him marching in the Rue Catinat. That was enough. The slimness of him in all that quiver of brown! Brownness of so many men flowing down the street, flowing across the sea, flowing into the mud. That one time she had seen him, something old and wounded had jumped out of hiding. It had frightened her. She wanted to run and throw herself into the quiver of brown.

So she did not go to the quay, when they sailed. It was enough to sit in the house and think of it. She thought of it all that day. And the next day. And for a week. And then she began to think of it less. Events even the most poignant, she realized, had a way of slinking into the back of the mind and sleeping there until awakened by some familiar association. Now she thought of it only at intervals; when she saw those photographs, photographs that Paul showed her; or when she saw a blur of brown troops.

Only an echo of the hoofs now. . . .

Of course, most of the Frenchmen and certain groups of natives were always ready to shout "Madelon" or "La Marseillaise" upon the slightest excuse. Frequently a few officers would sit around a table in one of the cafés, late at night, and sing patriotic airs to the clink of glasses.

Whenever there was a great French victory Saïgon whirled like the disk of a gramophone; and, like a

gramophone, it soon unwound, to await another turn of the handle.

Two or three times the tune was frenzy when a rumor stole about that a hostile gunboat had been sighted off the coast.

Once a bored half-caste, coming in from a long voyage in a junk, told a Madrassee money-changer that he had seen the entire German fleet near Pulo Condore; and as a consequence two staff officers forgot a dinner engagement with the Governor and were promptly scheduled to be sent to France at the first opportunity.

Only an echo now. . . .

After all, one cannot live on the other side of the world from a conflict and sustain continuous enthusiasm for it. Certainly not when that place happens to be so near the equator. Too much sun. Sun that makes the body uncurl like a tea-leaf and float in a limp sprawl. The slaughter of ten thousand men becomes simply the name of a town. Unless one happened to know someone who was killed or wounded. Or unless one had lived in that town or visited it. Of course, if most of those ten thousand were enemy men then it made the blood run with pride. Pride in the strength and skill of a nation that could kill so many of the enemy. At least, that was how Thi-Linh understood it from Paul.

Naturally, there was much talk about "the natives." Talk in offices where punkahs swayed; over aperitifs

in the hotels. Wondering what they would do. If they would do anything. Surely, spoke the Government through several thousand Frenchmen—who if without mistresses at least had servants—surely the Annamites, the Cochin-Chinese, the Cambodians, the Laotians, and the Tonkinese remembered those tortured centuries before France came to put an end to internal trouble and bring Civilization. And, remembering them, they would ignore the treacherous ripples generated by the enemy. France, the Protectress, was at war; already some of her tawny wards were fighting, but to be victorious she also had to have the support of those in the colony. She had faith in them, indeed such faith that an increased gendarmerie and Service Sureté continually watched over them to protect the loyal and punish those insolent rogues who forgot their debt to France.

All this talk vaguely amused Thi-Linh. France worrying about her colony. It seemed a bit ridiculous, a bit undignified. She knew that Paul used her to feel the pulse of the natives, just as other Frenchmen used their women. He encouraged her to go among "her people," as he put it, and listen for incendiary talk. She did not deliberately listen, but now and then she heard a little—trickles that came through Nanette or some other gossiping tongue. Of course, the brooding of the older people, they who remembered when rifles were stacked in the temples, smoldered and sometimes broke into inflamed words. But they were

too old to be active; and the younger ones, whom their talk might have affected, were too lazy, and they wore French clothes. Nanette, whatever she thought, was too discreet to say much.

Thi-Linh had formed very definite ideas. She had read and talked with enough people to know that colonization was not peculiar to the French alone, and if France did not have a protectorate over Indo-China, some other nation would. The French as masters were as good as most, she supposed, and better than many. Of course some of their pretensions were absurd. But so were the pretensions of all white men.

She did not hate white men, or even dislike them—except in individual cases. Perhaps it was her French blood. But she felt that it was something subtler than that. She was sorry for them; sorry for their absurd pretensions; sorry for the dark people who were the butt of these pretensions. Pity—pity with a certain irony. And desire, almost excruciating at times, to draw them all to her, white and dark alike, and give something out of herself. They would use her and leave her, both white and dark, but that realization in no wise lessened her desire to give. Understanding all this was part of the ancient wisdom with which she seemed to have been born.

She continued to read a great deal. Books that made her think much of what Justin had said about souls. Books that wistfully brought back the poetry of her early love for Kim Khouan. Books that were

like Paul, hot and restless, and left her pitying the men who wrote them. And she learned much through talk. Talk with Paul; with friends of Paul. All these friends were men; she had no contact with French women. These women dwelt on the remote outskirts of her life. Only rumors of them came to her. One curious trait she had observed was that they never talked to native women without raising their voices. And they always wore a look of contempt or condescension which she had begun to suspect was fear disguised.

Paul spent considerable time with these French women. "Stupïd little sparrows," he called them. Yet once when she ventured an uncomplimentary opinion he became very angry. Thi-Linh knew that most of them were aware he was living with her. "Keeping a half-caste," was how they spoke of it. They hated and envied her, undoubtedly; and she was sure they quarreled with Paul about her in that tolerant half playful manner women had when annoyed with men they desired. These women who never shared his black moods and his weakness! Who never took his tears to their bosoms! Who never opened their veins for him! Often the thought of them made her furious, but just as often she pitied them. Stupid little sparrows. Trying to rob her nest.

The Paul who went to tea with them, or dinner, and who sat through the day in the antechamber of the Governor's office was a different Paul when he was in

his house. Then he was the Paul who had called to her soundlessly from that dark street; whose feet she washed in ointment and wiped with her hair; who was in turn thoughtless and tender, brutal and helpless. He was the Paul who purged himself through her.

"What do birth and death matter?" he often said. "It is what lies between that counts."

And so the white current of him flashed through the days and nights, drawing vitality from the very tension at which he lived. It frightened her to think what would happen if he were suddenly denied the stimulation of opium. The curious thing about him was the cleverness with which he used narcotics. Rarely too much; just enough to keep him fusing. Too much would make him dead to the contact of life; and living was too precious for that. It was as though each experience was a fine wine that he held under his tongue for a moment before surrendering it to his fierce craving.

After he had been transferred he was very considerate of her, very thoughtful. He promised that soon she could buy European clothes, and he spent many evenings lounging about the house, playing those bantering little songs or smoking opium. There was something in his attentiveness which gave her the tired feeling under her heart. She felt he was forcing himself to be considerate out of gratitude. He knew what had happened of course. Probably he had known it would happen, even before he went to Phnom-Penh.

The fact that he never asked the colonel to dinner any more proved he knew now, if not then. Considerate. He was deliberately being considerate; and his attitude made her conscious that she had committed a sin for him.

One afternoon he came in very happy.

"Tomorrow," he announced, drawing a crumple of tissue-like piastre notes from his pocket, "you may buy yourself some French clothes."

Her heart jumped, then grew heavy with that tired weight under it.

The feeling was still there when, accompanied by Nanette, she went to a magasin on the Rue Catinat and outfitted herself. She also bought some silk at the Bombay store where she had worked, and had Madame Dessard take her measurements for a dress. It rather pleased her vanity to see the Frenchwoman fussing about her, tape-measure in hand and mouth full of pins. Several times Madame Dessard pricked her with a pin—intentionally she was sure.

"You have come up in the world, eh, Marie?" she said with a curious little smile Thi-Linh knew was envy.

Poor Madame Dessard . . .

I no longer look like the women on the piastre notes, she thought that evening when she put on one of her new dresses.

She remembered what she had thought the first time she had seen Nanette in European clothes: a French-

woman drowned in sunburn and powdered white. But her own skin was lighter, the effect different. The image looking back from the mirror had the warmth and glow of old ivory. As she gazed at herself she felt a quick pride in her pallid smoothness, in the straight slimness of a body that wore so well a dress foreign to it.

The smolder of her hair was about her shoulders, black as a night wind in which there were no stars. That was what it needed, a star.

She ran out into the garden, plunging into a blur of flowers, which stroked her like soft hands. She broke off one and stuck it in her hair. Those soft flower-hands held and crushed against her, warm on her throat, on her breasts. For an instant she swayed against them, suffering a sweet torture as she drew their fragrance deep into her. Heavy and sweet; velvet in the night. That was how she felt. Cool plush wrapped around the night, drawing the night into her, letting it swell and whirl within her. Black night in which she glowed like the flower in her hair.

By the time Paul had come, her mood had passed; that tugging heaviness was under her heart. When he saw her there was a passionate catch in his gaze, as though her loveliness was too much to devour at once. But the persistent heaviness stayed under her heart, even when the sudden impact of his embrace made her senses whir.

That night he took her to the cinema. It was the first time he had gone with her to any public gathering—and he did not look ashamed when the lights flashed on.

It was a night of triumph—cold triumph. A gesture, that was all; a gesture to her pride, to Saïgon. She could not feel the emotion her dreams had told her would fuse this moment. Paul was showing off her loveliness. But she could not cast out the suspicion that he also was paying a debt.

Afterward, thinking about it, it did not seem strange that her triumph was lifeless, for there was something familiar about it, as though she had known all along it would be this way when it happened. Why did the events of life seem like simply the substantial confirmation of what she had sensed previously?

Everything familiar, so familiar. . . . For had not she known before it occurred how Paul's thoughtfulness, his pride in her beauty would fray? She was not surprised when he grew irritable and quarreled with her over such insignificant things as spots of mildew on his uniforms. Nor when he spent fewer evenings with her. Not even when she passed him one night riding with a Frenchwoman whom she could not recognize because they sat so close in the hooded carriage. No; she had known all this would happen. And also that in his moments of weakness he would continue to cling to her. Pouring his weakness into her. Dissolving it

in her. Flowing into her and saying: "I am cleansed, I am strong."

Katharsis. Through her for him, and in the excess of her giving, for herself.

9

It seemed to Thi-Linh that there had always been war in Europe, that there always would be. It had entered permanently into the background of her consciousness, brought forth at intervals by talk and reports in the news-journals.

Life seemed filled with desperate repetitions. Food and sleep. Books and the cinema. Household duties. Paul sitting all day in the antechamber of the Governor's office, and prowling about at night. Letters from Mama Thi-Bao telling how her baby was growing. The hot season had come, and each day was a glaring replica of the previous one, the nights woven in a changeless pattern of starry heat.

There was only one change in her immediate sphere. Nanette had a new husband. And he was not French. She was very emphatic about this detail when she brought the news to Thi-Linh. He came from Belgium. "But that is almost France," she added naïvely. He was very tall and blond, she said, and two fingers of his right hand were missing. This was why he was not fighting. They had been shot off in Africa. He was quite wealthy. Moreover, he was extremely

jealous. When he saw her looking at another man his great blue eyes became little flickering pinpoints. "I call him my white panther," she said in those suave tones in which she sheathed all feeling.

Nanette wore very expensive clothes now. And she had a carriage all her own.

But life continued dull for Thi-Linh. She planned a visit to Stung-Treng, but Paul had an attack of malaria and she had to stay with him.

He never complained about money any more. He told her, with a very significant smile, that being on his Excellency's staff had its advantages. He increased her allowance; often he bought her new clothes. But the world seemed motionless and chiseled. She was moving in a corridor lined with bas-reliefs. The dreadful changelessness of things was hardening her, she felt; very soon she herself would become motionless and chiseled.

At times she wished it were possible for her to plunge into that mud of Europe; feel the pull of it, the squirm of it; mud all about her. At least then she would be surrounded by life that moved. Terrible, shattering life, splintering men's bones, feeding their flesh to the earth, making white cups of their empty skulls, filling them with blood. To be in the midst of life again, in the sweat and muscle of life! Anywhere but here where all those familiar faces, limbs, torsos, bodies, everything had the pallor of petrified members glaring under the sun.

10

The Service Sureté had one method of apprehending suspicious characters that had caused Thi-Linh annoyance several times. On certain nights the gendarmerie would fling a net of men about some quarter, and then draw it tight, soundlessly and swiftly. If you happened to be in that net it was most inconvenient, that is if you were unfortunate enough not to be French and without a card of identification.

The Government required this card of identification of all natives or people with native blood, who, officially, were the same as natives. This card stated your name, occupation, age, and other information necessary. The number of this card was registered with the Government; consequently the Government had its finger on those several millions of dark people or half-dark people under its protection. Very thorough.

If it happened, one of these nights when the Service Sureté flung out a net, that you did not possess a card of identification, you were put in jail. If you had simply left it home, then you were released when the card was produced. But if it turned out that you had failed to pay your piastres for an identification card that year, then you contributed a certain sum toward the maintenance of Civilization in Indo-China. In the event that you were unable to pay it, your incarceration was prolonged.

Two or three times Thi-Linh had been caught in this net. The first time she was released when an officer came up and recognized her. After that, when she was better known, she had no difficulty. Nevertheless, it was always a very annoying experience.

One night when she was riding about after the cinema a sudden tension in the quiet, emphasized by the sound of running feet, warned her that again she had blundered into one of these nets. Nothing would happen of course. But she did not enjoy the feeling of hot nausea that traveled over her when anything like this occurred.

A dart of white flickered around the corner ahead. Almost immediately it vanished in a hedge across the street. Following it came a native policeman who also plunged into the foliage. A moment later, as she approached, the uniformed man emerged dragging a figure that jerked and swayed.

The dim greenish lamplight flowing from the opposite side of the street gave those two forms a fluid unsubstantiality, like bodies wavering under the sea. Suddenly the dragging figure lurched and broke away.

As Thi-Linh came abreast of them, the figure that had wrenched free lunged out into the street. She had a brief impression of a slim young body and a pale face that rushed at her in the darkness like a blur of phosphorus. But brief as that impression was it sufficed to fling her memory back to a bench in the park,

with the same face beside her; only then it had been blenched with powder instead of terror.

The boy was almost at her side, evidently blind to the rickshaw, when she cried out. There was a rattling impact that almost threw her to the pavement, an abrupt sensation of swerving accompanied by a heavy thudding slap. The white face vanished. Only the quick tautening of the coolie's muscles prevented the rickshaw from turning over; with a glance behind, he broke into a run, reaching the corner at breathless speed and whirling her into another street.

Stamped upon her mind was a picture of the policeman bending over the boy with something that he worked like the handle of a pump and that made squashing sounds. It made her weak and ill. . . .

The next day she read in the newspaper that on the previous night a young native who had been bold enough to resist the police and run had died as the result of injuries received when he collided with a rickshaw. As she read it a vision of the scene flared momentarily, seeming to careen with the motion of the policeman's arm as he worked that thing up and down upon the prostrate form. . . .

"There is a great deal of dissatisfaction among the natives," Paul remarked when he read it.

II

Often now Thi-Linh saw Nanette riding with her husband, and once they had stopped and talked with her.

He was tall and red with sunburn. All his vitality seemed centered in his sharp blue eyes. Eyes that were steel rivets holding up the immense muscular bulk of his body. He moved with a slowness that those eyes belied; and when he smiled he seemed more blond than ever, as though the expression reflected that brassy alertness hinted in his gaze. He spoke French with a husky heaviness which made it sound foreign. Heavy. That was it, Thi-Linh decided. Something heavy about him. She wondered if those blue rivets of eyes did not grow tired holding up the weight of him. The hand with two fingers missing was vaguely uncanny.

"He thinks you are very pretty," Nanette told her a shade too casually the next time she saw her. "He has asked me to have you over to dinner some night." But she was very indefinite about the latter. Nor was Thi-Linh sorry. She did not think she would like to be near this Belgian, even for a few hours. She remembered too vividly his big fists, on which the large veins stood out with a suggestion of sluggish brutality. The sort of hands that fumbled over one.

Several times after that she saw him with Nanette in the cathedral. When he knelt to pray the blunt strength

of him sagged to the floor, with those huge fists, vein-corded, crumpled motionless on the floor at his side. He made her think of a great blond ape. During mass, when long prayers for the soldiers dissolved in swoons of incense, his blue eyes flickered to pinpoints—as Nanette said they did when he saw her looking at other men. Jealous. Jealous of those prayers for soldiers. Thi-Linh could picture the great hulk of him in the mud of Europe, his heaviness smothering men. At such times he seemed grotesque and pathetic. Two missing fingers kept him out of that mud; this blond ape who was jealous of those prayers for soldiers.

One night Thi-Linh passed Madame Dessard in a dim street near the Botanical Gardens. She recognized her by the fact that her feet were crossed above empty slippers. Sitting beside her in the carriage was a man—a white man. The indistinguishable blot of his face startled Thi-Linh. Madame Dessard with a Frenchman! As Thi-Linh stared, Madame Dessard leaned out of the carriage; a moment later a distant laugh sounded down the street. It was a laugh of triumph that seemed to say: "At last I have a Frenchman!"

Some days later Thi-Linh encountered her in front of the Bombay store, and her smile was a reflection of that laugh.

When Nanette visited Thi-Linh next she had an air of suppressed excitement. That Nanette should show even a hint of emotion was extraordinary.

"I am going away, my infant," she announced, trying to be casual. "He is taking me to Europe with him when he goes."

Thi-Linh asked when that would be, and Nanette shrugged. "Sometime soon. Is it not splendid? To Europe, my infant! What do you think of that?"

Thi-Linh thought of it much during the next few days. Nanette going into the midst of life, while she remained in that corridor of bas-reliefs. Perhaps her Belgian, that great blond ape of a man, would go into the mud of Europe to smother men. The brown mud in which Kim Khouan marched. Well, Nanette would always have more than she. But she did not envy her—not with that Belgian.

She told Paul that Nanette was going away. He laughed.

"I doubt it," he said tersely.

A tender night. The stars were soft ashes floating away from the fire of the moon. Paul looked very pliant and boyish reclining in a great chair on the veranda. In the darkness, the scent of flowers was heavy with a damp coolness. She asked him if he would take her riding. For a moment he did not stir, then he shrugged.

They rode along the quays, then back by the Botanical Gardens. Paul leaned against her in silence.

The night was very quiet except for the occasional cry of "Kao!" as some Frenchman called a rickshaw. So silent. The houses, deep in shadow, seemed carved

on stone; endless friezes that dripped night. And on the other side of the earth hoofs were beating in the mud. . . . Thi-Linh let her memory wander among those photographs of the battle-fields. Brown ranks creeping across the mud, and Kim Khouan in the midst of them. Brown ranks which drew her irresistibly, and into which she flung herself, as she had wanted to do that day in the Rue Catinat. Ranks that rippled across the mud in a glide of smoke and reddish flecks which exploded in bursts of blood. It was so real that for a moment she imagined she heard the crackle of gunfire. Suddenly she started.

"Did you hear that?" she asked Paul.

He sat up quickly; he had been asleep. "What?"

"It sounded like guns."

He glanced drowsily at the luminous face of his wrist watch.

"It's over now," he said. "Orders not to say anything about it until afterward. Your friend Nanette and her German lover were arrested this afternoon—and were to be shot tonight. The house was searched the other day. I had my suspicions from the very first . . . but we had to have evidence. . . ."

12

A year had passed.

Thi-Linh, approaching Stung-Treng on the river boat, thought of the night in Saïgon when she heard

those shots, and it seemed far off, on the other side of a widening gap.

So much had happened since then. So many things that were like spades digging a great trench between her and that night. A trench in which numbers of people were buried.

The war was over now.

The news had come to her with a feeling like the loosening of chains. She would never forget that day in Saïgon. Blood-music that streamed out upon the sunlight, upon people; people who drank it greedily. Red wine in white skulls. A great parade bristling in the Rue Catinat. Mass in the cathedral. The glare seemed drunk with a mad tumble of flags and faces. Saïgon shuddering in a bath of hysteria, drinking blood from an empty skull.

Nor would she ever forget Paul's face as he came to tell her about it. . . . White with excitement. Holding out a glass of red wine for her to drink with him. . . . She dropped the glass and it crashed like chains falling about her feet. . . .

So long ago—on the other side of a great trench.

Now the green banks of the Mé-Kong—Mother Mé-Kong at whose breast Indo-China suckled—and Stung-Treng ahead. Mama Thi-Bao, the baby; the house where she had lived with Justin, the pool in the jungle. It was like going back into youth and taking with her the accumulation of wisdom and experience that had come since.

The pattern of Stung-Treng on the shore ahead brought a tremble into her throat. She thought she could see the dark pigmy of Mama Thi-Bao at the landing. But there were so many pigmies there she couldn't be sure.

Coming home, coming home. Bringing the gifts of wisdom and experience to her youth.

As the boat jarred against the bank she saw Mama Thi-Bao's face in a crowd of other faces, and a slim little brown body lifted in her arms above all those moving heads and shoulders. Her son. Suddenly she felt dreadfully tired, and her knees seemed empty spools.

13

They had reached the shop—the shop with its streaks of smoke and dust, its border of mold—and Vu-Trong-Khai was grinning at her, and his children, grown almost beyond recognition, were staring wide-eyed. A little crowd had followed them from the landing, discussing her French clothes quite audibly. But all her thoughts were crowded into the brown body held close to her. Little Justin—so big! And wearing black silk trousers, and looking at her in that inquisitive, puzzled way. The luminous darkness of his eyes hurt her. They were like . . . like Kim Khouan's. Little Justin—six years old! And so awed by this woman in French clothes.

Mama Thi-Bao dropped upon the platform in the

rear of the shop in the old, familiar attitude. There was no change in her—except a few glinting streaks in her black hair. Thi-Linh sat beside her, holding little Justin in her lap. Vu-Trong-Khai and the children gathered about; and in the doorway a few curious forms hovered.

Mama Thi-Bao rolled a betel-leaf, dipped it in lime, and then as she chewed asked Thi-Linh how long she was going to stay.

Thi-Linh wished that her stepfather were not there.

"I don't know," she said. Then, after a moment, she added: "I have left Paul, Mama Thi-Bao."

Her mother showed no surprise nor any other emotion. She merely nodded and went on chewing. Vu-Trong-Khai grinned. Little Justin squirmed about and looked at her with dazed questioning in his eyes.

I have left Paul.

How those words brought it all back! That night in the Rue Taberd, the sweating darkness and the crunch of wheels as a hooded carriage drove by . . .

"There was a French woman," she said aloud.

A French woman. A French woman who rode in the carriage with her feet crossed above empty shoes; who sat so close to a man in white that the darkness of her dress blended imperceptibly into the pallor of him. A man whose voice drifted to her above the crunch of wheels. She would never forget the sickness of that moment.

"She was old—much older than I," Thi-Linh told Mama Thi-Bao.

For a long while, that night, she had stood there in the Rue Taberd shivering. When finally she moved it was to walk slowly around the cathedral, around and around, until the twin spires seemed to topple against each other. Then she had forced herself to go to the Rue Paul Blanchy and wait near the lane leading to Madame Dessard's house. Finally they came. . . . After that she went home and waited in the living-room.

It was late when Paul returned. The sight of his white face, so guileless, made her feel as she had felt long ago when Kim Khouan had told her of his betrothal. Blindly she had sunk her nails into Paul's cheek, and then nearly fainted when she saw the blood.

"So—Madame la Panthère!" he had said. And she had gone into her room and locked the door.

The recollection of that night was brutally vivid even now. Little Justin slipped out of her lap and stood staring at her.

She went on with her story: "But this woman had a little money. . . ."

Money. Paul had dared to speak of that the next morning. "Did you think I was able to buy all those clothes for you on a captain's salary?" It was like Paul to say that. So helpless that he seized any weapon. She wondered, thinking about it afterward,

how she had restrained herself from walking out of the house then. It was his face that held her. Even as he hurt her cruelly he besought her not to leave him; not in words but in his look. Paul, who was afraid for the soft whiteness of himself.

"I stayed with him for a while after I found out," she said to Mama Thi-Bao, "but when the war was over, I left him. . . . I—I knew more officers would be coming to Indo-China," she lied.

What humiliation, after that night when she saw Paul with Madame Dessard! Forgiving him, yet feeling contempt for him, and hating herself for the strength that made it possible for her to continue ministering to his weakness. But she stayed. And all because his eyes besought her to help him preserve the soft whiteness of himself. . . . And then the day when he came with the news that the war was ended; sound of chains falling about her feet. Drinking the blood of freedom while Saïgon drank the blood of victory.

"I am going home now," she had told Paul.

He had pretended he thought she meant only for a visit, smiling and telling her, yes, she could go; until the look in her eyes stopped him.

"I suppose you've got all you can out of me," he had flung at her. But as he flung it he knew it was futile and cowardly.

"I am going," she had repeated. He only laughed —laughed to cover his pain.

Oh, the excruciating whiteness of him as he stood there! Something wavered within her. But she had decided. That night in the Rue Taberd she had been freed from Paul, and since then only waiting because his tortured look pleaded with her. Now the war was over, he no longer needed her.

He pretended to read a book in the living-room while she packed all her possessions. She took everything he had given her. Then she sent for coolies to come for her baggage. As she told Paul good-by he smiled. It must have taken all his courage.

"I told you you would go farther than I could ever take you," he had said, still smiling.

And she had hurried out, the whiteness of him like white blood in her eyes.

As Thi-Linh finished her story Mama Thi-Bao merely nodded that meaningless nod of hers. Little Justin had sidled over to her now. Vu-Trong-Khai lighted a cigarette; as he rose he gestured his children aside and clattered into the front of the shop. The children hung about, staring.

Outside the sunlight seemed to catch and intensify the heat in savage waves. Thi-Linh felt it penetrating into the gloom-cool room. Thick smells entered with it. Somewhere in the glaring silence voices sang like beetles. Stung-Treng was throbbing in the noon-day with familiar monotony.

With a little sigh Thi-Linh abandoned herself to its inertia.

14

She had expected to slip back into the life of the village and find rest—for a time at least. But the Thi-Linh who as a little girl dreamed in the silence of Stung-Treng was not the woman in French clothes who for several years had slept in beds and eaten European food. Stung-Treng was lifeless and empty now, and even her memories could not awaken it.

She tried desperately to resurrect the habits of her girlhood. In the late afternoons she walked along the bank of the Mé-Kong, but instead of watching the bathers who lay flank to flank with the brown mud, she found herself thinking of the quays of Saïgon and the soft rose-bloom that touched them at this hour. And at her approach those bathers slipped into the water, thinking her a Frenchwoman, and then laughed when they saw she was not.

The house where she had lived with Justin was occupied by a Cambodian family. The one time she had seen it, drawn there by memories, two brown women with discolored teeth were talking stridently on the veranda, and pigs wandered in and out of the rooms.

After that, she feared to go to the pool in the jungle. But she did. A tangle of lotuses bled over it in fragrant pain, almost hiding the water. In a tree, a parrakeet twittered softly. The silence was unbearable.

Everything had changed, the people included. Once she saw Kim Khouan's father; he looked very old and feeble, walking along with the help of a young Annamite. Monsieur Malardier had been transferred to some town in Laos; in his place was a much younger man, a slender, angular Frenchman with a reddish beard and horn-rimmed spectacles, who always squinted at her through the thick lenses of his glasses and then belatedly touched his helmet with an uncertain air. Father Mehry lay under a cross in the Mission compound. He had been succeeded by a sallow priest with a watery blue gaze who had a distracting habit of wiping the moisture from his eyes during confession.

Only Mama Thi-Bao was the same—and Vu-Trong-Khai. When he smoked opium the air seemed warm with the presence of Paul.

Little Justin had overcome his shyness. But often she saw those luminous-dark eyes upon her with a look half of wonder and half of awe. That gaze was so like Kim Khouan's it always startled her.

There was no one to write her news of Saïgon. Nanette, who might have done it, Nanette, her only friend, was buried in the trench that separated her from the past.

Whenever she thought of Nanette a great pity filled her. Poor little creature! A wasp who had stung herself to death. Poor Nanette . . . and, yes, poor blond ape of a man lying under the soil . . . poor

Justin, likewise in the ground . . . poor Paul . . . and Madame Dessard with her swollen feet . . . painted boy crashing into the wheels of her rickshaw . . . poor everybody. Herself she did not pity; her acceptance of the inevitable was complete. That, and the richness of experience, seemed all she had gained from those years of contact with the world. But was not that enough?

She read through every newspaper that came with the weekly mails. The familiar names gave her a sensation of pleasure. Madame the wife of the Governor was giving a reception. Major So-and-so transferred. Monsieur Such-and-such going to France. Precious little echoes of Saïgon.

The last journal brought the announcement that the Tirailleurs Annamites were coming back from France. This news startled and vaguely frightened her. Of course she had known they would be returning soon, but seeing it in print made it so definite. Why was she frightened? At Stung-Treng she would not see those brown ranks; and Kim Khouan would stay in Saïgon—unless he came to visit his father, who was too old to make the trip down to the coast. For some reason the thought of the Tirailleurs Annamites returning made her cold in the pit of her.

Several days after she saw the notice in the paper she passed a white-clad woman in the street. Not until the woman had gone by did she recognize her; and then the fact that she wore mourning thrust Thi-

Linh's nerves into dark carnival. She hurried to the shop.

"Mama Thi-Bao," she said, "I passed the sister of Kim Khouan's wife a moment ago, and she was wearing white."

Mama Thi-Bao nodded. "Kim Khouan's wife died last month," she said.

It was several minutes before Thi-Linh was calm again. Then a heavy lethargy settled upon her.

All that day little Justin's eyes disturbed her more than before.

That night she did not sleep well. She wandered between the feverish jungle of dreams and the heat of a black room. Early in the morning she went to the pool in the jungle.

The sun had not yet reached the tops of the trees, and the little clearing was a cup of shade, sweet-scented with the breaths of drowsing lotus-buds. For a long while she lay there in the cool water, the stems of the plants soft against her; and as the sun rose higher, a stream of gold crept over the tree tops and lay beside her.

In the afternoon she passed the commissaire in the main road. He stared through his thick lenses, then stopped abruptly, awkwardly.

"Good day," he said, smiling.

"Good day, monsieur."

He was studying her through those horn-rimmed glasses.

"Mademoiselle Thi-Linh, is it not? I have heard of you." He hesitated; and she smiled inwardly. She knew what he was going to say. And how stupid it was, how banal! She was impatient; she wished he would hurry and get through with it.

"I should be glad to see more of you," he announced finally. "I am living alone, and . . ."

"Monsieur flatters me," she interrupted quietly. "But I am going back to Saïgon on the next boat—to meet someone."

His eyes had a puzzled look that seemed magnified by those thick lenses. Then he smiled.

"Ah! To meet someone!" he repeated. "An old lover, I suppose."

She smiled.

"Yes, monsieur, an old lover."

15

When Thi-Linh arrived in Saïgon she went immediately to the house of the Tonkinese family with whom she and Nanette had stayed. They told her the ship bringing the Tirailleurs Annamites had come three days before.

She was disappointed but it did not upset her greatly. Now she would go to the barracks and find him. She was sure he would not have started for Stung-Treng to see his father so soon.

As she dressed, an ecstatic singing filled her body.

She tried to suppress it, for experience had taught her that too much happiness in advance was an invitation to disaster, but it would not be hushed. And, after all, did she know how he would receive her? Or how his appearance would affect her? France might have made great changes in him.

She drew the long coil of her hair into a black sheath and wrapped it about her head. It was fitting that she should go to him dressed as an Annamite. That dream tunic of black tissue over yellow had frayed with the years, but in its place she had another equally fine.

As she click-clacked out and called a rickshaw, the Tonkinese family gathered to stare, their number augmented by curious neighbors.

It was a bright morning, and the heat seemed to beat on the pavement with a silent clanging. Overhead, the clouds drifted like pure thoughts in an azure brain. All this warmth and light, seeming friendlier because of the presence of so many people, made her pleasurably conscious of the curve and dreamy pallor of herself under the tunic. A tremendous joy of living filled her to the very throat. It was like cool, fragrant water; water poured into a vase; gleaming vase of white porcelain in which she was carrying the flowers of her love to him.

As the coolie set down the shafts in front of the barracks she felt a muted, vibrant fear that was the uncertain overture to rhapsody.

The sentry, leaning on his rifle, gave her a casual glance; other soldiers, gathered about the windows, stared. From inside came the sibilant clicking of a typewriter, and the hollow sounds of people moving in uncarpeted halls.

She did not deign to question the sentry but demanded to see one of his officers.

Another soldier led her through the hall.

She was taken into the room where the typewriter was clicking. A half-caste was seated before the machine, and he gave her a long look, continuing to write until the keys caught, whereupon he muttered something and jerked the paper out.

That purring rip of the typewriter-roll seemed to release a shiver in Thi-Linh. Anxiously she watched the faces of the orderlies who came and went.

The soldier who had brought her appeared from behind a screen set before the doorway to another room, motioning her inside.

An officer, bent over some papers on his desk, looked up with a frown as she entered. Slowly the frown vanished.

"Mademoiselle?"—waving toward a chair.

As she sat down she became suddenly ill at ease. She must hurry this interview through, she told herself.

"I am looking for a man named Kim Khouan," she began, "who is a *doi* in the Tirailleurs Annamites."

He was staring at her with a wrinkle between his eyes; but suddenly he smiled.

"Ah, Madame Marie!" he exclaimed. "My God! I hardly knew you in those clothes. What is this masquerade?"

She had recognized him also—some officer whose name she could not remember. His familiarity annoyed her.

"Where is Paul?" he asked.

"I do not know," she said, her annoyance growing.

"Mmmm! You do not know, eh?" He laughed. "Well, well . . ."

"I came . . ." she began again.

"Yes, yes! About some native. . . . But tell me what is the trouble between you and Paul?"

Her face suddenly went hot with anger. She could scarcely control herself. "I have left him," she said sharply.

"Ah! So you have left him, eh! Madame la Panthère, clawing at hearts, eh? Well, well . . ."

Madame la Panthère! Those words seemed flung toward her from taut, quivering haunches, like an actual furry body. How did he know what Paul had called her? Had Paul talked? A final insult from him, thrown at her out of the past. Madame la Panthère, Madame la Panthère. The name throbbed with the blood in her temples. She looked at the officer through a film of rage. For a moment she thought she would spring upon him. A panther, yes—protecting herself—all those years—preserving herself—for

Kim Khouan. She clung to the arms of the chair.

"I came . . ." she articulated.

"And who will be your next one, eh?" bantered the officer.

All that thrumming in her brain threatened to burst in dizzy carousal.

"I want to find . . ."

"Yes, yes, I haven't forgotten. A fellow named Kim Khouan."

He tapped a bell. An orderly stepped from behind the screen, and a few words passed between them. The Frenchman shrugged. He looked at her with an apologetic smile.

"I regret it," he said, "but they left him in France —for good." He smiled again, shrugged. "It is war!"

She stared at him, uncomprehending. It seemed that a tremendous vibration had started in her head and it shook her eyes until the officer's head danced absurdly on his shoulders. Several seconds passed before her vision became stationary, and she saw the ghostly confirmation of his words in his face. . . . Brown mud and a brown figure drawn down beneath it, earth feeding earth from an empty skull. . . . In that instant she slid down ages, into the beginning of anguish. Something crashed. A vase. She had come bringing the flowers of her love in a white porcelain vase. And now someone had dropped that vase down ages. Shattered it against an empty skull, so

that the flowers fell into vacant sockets and made mockery of their hollowness.

"Planton!" she heard the officer shout.

How silly! Calling an orderly to help him gather up the pieces of a shattered vase.

16

When she fell asleep that night she had a strange dream:

She was in the cathedral praying before a figure on a cross, a young Annamite whose pathetic slimness was like yearning done into bronze. Suddenly there came a crash of rickshaw wheels. Stained-glass windows fell into sharp little rainbows all over the floor, and Nanette was lying in the midst of them, a lighted candle in one hand and a sheaf of yellow hair in the other. Whirling through the air was a delirium of faces, white faces, sick with overdesire. They dissolved into a wan vapor that lay swimming over the incense-burners. Banners and drums filled the cathedral, arousing shadowy thunder. She buried her ears under her palms. Then all that ghostly clamor melted into a ringing that made the silence well in great ripples and eddy away from her, leaving her spirit free to ascend like mist sighing up from a pool; a dark pool that breathed into space. "Blessed Mary, Holy Virgin . . . I will share the couch of my Master; will give him sons to perpetuate his race . . . and they will

maintain the Cult. . . ." It was her own voice, flung down from the immense etherous space whither she had aspired. There, high above earth, the naked pallor of her spun like a white pole controlling the body of her kneeling in the cathedral. About her, crushing music of silence. She whirled in an ecstasy of light, carried higher and higher. Far off she saw a cloud. It unrolled to greet her. Then she saw that it had human form. It was a man, dark and shining, who came toward her with the eager step of a lover. He was neither Kim Khouan nor Justin nor Paul, and yet he was all of them. Spinning white pole of her balancing that body centuries below; spinning magnet of her lover balancing the pole of herself. Looking down through sea upon sea of silence she could see the twin spires of the cathedral, like the upthrust thumbs of a primitive altar. On that altar the body of her knelt, making vain prayers, while the pole of her yielded to that dark lover, passed through his lips into a swoon of pallor. Far below a thin voice was intoning: "May God receive this, the soul of thine unworthy servant. . . ."

Her dream contracted to a frail body taking its last communion from an empty skull.

Part Three: PIASTRE AND PHENIX

IT WAS that mauve-dark hour when social Saïgon, having perspired through the thé-dansant at the Hotel Continental and imbibed an alarming number of cocktails, emerges into the streets, laughing and talking very loudly, to return home in rickshaws, carriages, and automobiles, there to continue to perspire and drink more cocktails in preparation for the interminable courses of a French dinner.

The café was almost deserted, but the orchestra was still playing, and one couple—a Jugo-Slavonian dancer who had drifted down from Shanghai and his partner—swayed and undulated to a tango while the few remaining people watched over aperitifs. Soft-shod "boys" came and went with a rattle of glasses that made castanets click to the Andalusian rhythm. Webs of smoke stretched on the heated air and frayed, leaving a thick haze in which the smells of liquors, perfumes, and hot breaths curdled and clotted.

In the street, rickshaw-coolies hovered, leaning on uplifted shafts; little Annamite boys waved newssheets; older natives drifted about with inlaid trays, incense-burners, and Buddhas to sell.

Across the way, in front of the opera house, stood rows of taxicabs.

A gentle cadence measured off the flowing sounds in the Rue Catinat.

Among the lingering groups at the sidewalk tables around the Continental were three men flushed with drink and all talking at once. That was no particular distinction, except that two of them happened to be British. The third was very fat and very French. The incredible fact that these Englishmen were talking as much as their Gallic companion could be traced to the empty bottles before them.

". . . yes," the fat Frenchman was saying, "just like the Queen of Sheba! But you saw her—sweeping out of the café, with not so much as a look at anyone, and into her motorcar. *Her* motorcar! Of course, that old imbecile gave it to her. . . . Mon Dieu! I shall never forget it! Like the Queen of Sheba!"

And he laughed until his red cheeks looked raw with tears.

"Incomparable!" he went on. "I wish I had a picture of it. Not a word, not a bow, not even to me, *me*. . . . Oh, mon Dieu!" He wiped his eyes. "And did you hear what Ledou said as she got into the car? Ledou is the gentleman I introduced you to, who sat at the next table. Did you hear what he said? 'Well, I wonder how long that will last. . . .' She heard it, too. But not a look; she simply dropped into the back

seat of the car and rode off . . . just like the Queen of Sheba. . . ."

He drew a deep breath and swallowed the remaining grenadine in his glass.

"I knew her when she was a little girl," he continued; "I was commissaire of the town where she lived."

"Was she as flashy then?" one of the Englishmen asked.

"Too bad she's a half-caste," said the other. "You know, you really couldn't tell it—unless you looked closely, of course."

"Flashy?" repeated Monsieur Malardier. "You mean— Ah, yes, I understand. . . . No—she was a pretty little thing, prettier than most—and very wise. A golden little creature. . . . I knew her first husband."

"Husband?"

"By Jove, you Frenchmen are broad! We wouldn't for a minute. . . ."

"Why not husband? He took care of her, loved her. . . . Poor Batteur! He died of fièvre-de-bois—up in Laos, where I have been for eight years. But since then there have been many others, I hear. I had not seen her for years—not since she was at Stung-Treng. I would not have recognized her today if she had not been pointed out. It was Ledou—you heard him. He said, 'Look, there she is. She is making her papa give her a big dinner tonight.' And I looked.

My God! Those clothes! Her present husband is quite rich—he is one of the directors in the Banque de l'Indo-Chine. And quite old, I understand. But what does that matter? She has had young ones—it is the piastres now. They say she got him in Hanoi. And now she has him wrapped around her little finger. But, as Ledou said, I wonder how long that will last?"

"What do your Frenchwomen think of her?"

"Yes, what do they think?"

Monsieur Malardier laughed loudly. "They do not think about her often—it makes them too angry! Métisse! Catin! But, after all, what difference does a marriage ceremony make? It only makes it more difficult to get out of! But women—they do not understand. . . .

"Allez, allez!" he shouted suddenly as an Annamite peddler, insinuating himself in front of him, held out an inlaid teakwood plaque. Then, on second thought, and with a wink at the Englishmen, he called the fellow back.

"Combien?"—tapping the plaque.

The Annamite smiled importunately. "Dix piastres, m'sieur."

Monsieur Malardier flung up his hands.

"Qui est-ce qui?" he shrieked, winking at his companions again.

"Neuf piastres," said the Annamite, looking frightened but still smiling.

"Mon Dieu! Neuf piastres? Ridicule!"

"Huit piastres, m'sieur."

"Non! Voleur! Allez, allez!"

"Sept, m'sieur," the Annamite persisted.

Laughing again until his red cheeks looked raw, Monsieur Malardier gestured him away.

"You see?" he said to the Englishmen. "If I had wanted it, I could have gotten him down to five piastres, perhaps four. Robbers, these natives!"

"Same in India," said one of the Englishmen.

"Or in F.M.S.," added the other.

"Pigs," concluded Monsieur Malardier. Then, after a pause, he remarked: "Incredible, is it not, that she has the blood of such people in her, eh? She danced around in there, doing the new steps and dressed like a Frenchwoman, yet really she was dancing naked to a khène—a khène is the native instrument of the country where I live, Laos. There is no such thing as half-caste; they are all natives. Selling plaques and asking twice what they are worth. And she, well, some day she will have to come down in *her* price. Half-caste! Pouf! They are brown underneath."

"I can't bear the blighters," remarked one of the Englishmen.

"Yet she was jolly good-looking," ventured the other.

"They are beautiful, some of these métisses, and even some of the brown ones; and they are very gentle. But one must not forget that they are half white or brown. . . . Boi-ee!"

A "boy," sandaled feet darting under flopping trousers, came running.

"Trois Martel-Perrier!" ordered Monsieur Malardier.

"Oh, I say!" objected one of the Englishmen faintly.

"Really, old fellow . . ." began the other.

"One must drink more in the East," laughed Monsieur Malardier. "It is the tradition."

"To keep your liver afloat, as they say," proposed one of his guests.

"Right-o!" verified the other.

"To drink freely and still be gentlemen," expounded the Frenchman, "is the proof of our ability to remain civilized among barbarians. A-a-a-ah!"—as the drinks arrived. Then he chuckled. "Mon Dieu! I shall never forget her sweeping out of the hotel and into that car! La grande maîtresse! Just like the Queen of Sheba! And, you know, she has a son—by a native—he must be fourteen now. . . . Well, salut!"

"Cheerio!"

"Ditto!"

Slowly the people ebbed out of the café. *"I want to be happy . . ."* wailed the orchestra. Clash of glasses and droning voices, all caught like flies in the webby smoke. The little Annamite boys in the street stood listening with puzzled gazes. In the Rue Catinat, the tamarinds sighed faintly as a breeze roved up from the river.

2

Thi-Linh, riding home in her motorcar, was extremely annoyed.

One gray-slippered toe tapped the foot-rest, and the other, crossed over an ankle suave in chiffon hose, moved restlessly. She tried to light a cigarette but the wind was too strong; impatiently she ordered the chauffeur to slow down. Her narrowed, intense gaze, in a swathe of smoke, saw the cathedral advancing toward the wind-shield. In a moment she would be home; and suddenly she realized she did not wish to be home. She might be late for dinner, but—well, let them wait.

"Go out the Govap road a little way and back," she told the driver.

Her gaze strayed down to the illusory sheen of her dress. Gray silk crêpe—from Paris. She remembered how cool and svelte she had looked before going to the hotel; now all the poise that her appearance had given her seemed destroyed. And merely because she had heard a Frenchman question her ability to hold Monsieur Chauvet.

"Well, I wonder how long that will last!"

She had blazed as she heard it. Now she seemed turned to velvet, cut-velvet in which there was a definite pattern of cold anger. She was not irritated by what he had said so much as by the realization that she was not above words. The very fact that she was

disturbed made her wonder if, subconsciously, she did doubt her own ability. It was a challenge to her faith in herself.

Long ago all the terrific emotional surfeit that was the quick-flesh of youth had run out of her—like fertile soil suddenly become sand, and leaving in its place a hard luster. It was not that she had grown callous; it was simply that she had learned a greater imperviousness. Words seemed to have lost their power to hurt her. Words. What were they, she asked herself, but the false symbols by which people accomplished a beautiful and studied deception or achieved some imaginary venom or nobility that satisfied their fears?

Yet, in spite of this knowledge, the Frenchman's words did trouble her. Had he heard something that caused his remark?

For two years now she had been living with Urbain Chauvet, and often he had stroked her hair (with those hands so immaculate and bloodless) and said: "It is a pity more do not know how clever you are—and yet I might be jealous if they did." The remembrance of this was reassuring. She knew that she had a lithe intelligence, that she helped him in many ways, but it always pleased her to hear he also was aware of it.

An ironic smile touched her lips. He was a man of influence, one of the guardians of much of the wealth that flowed in and out of Indo-China; and how amus-

ing it would be, she thought, if Indo-China were suddenly told that often his decisions were her own made public!

She, a half-caste, with her finger in Indo-China's finances!

Once Monsieur Chauvet had said to her: "I used to wonder why the Annamite women always sit in the front of the shops and the men idle in the rear; now I think I understand."

The recollection of those little incidents was dissipating her uneasiness, leaving her concerned chiefly with the fact that she had allowed herself to be disturbed. She was valuable to Urbain Chauvet; moreover, he loved her, passionately, jealously, with the desperate affection of a man who realized he had reached the age when it was difficult to hold women.

And this dinner tonight, was not that proof enough? Monsieur le Gouverneur would be there, and other important officials. No women, of course. But she had long since dismissed the idea of ever associating with French women, and now regarded them with the contemptuousness that is jealousy suppressed. A few days before, Monsieur Chauvet had remarked that there were certain matters he wished to discuss with the Governor; and very casually she had suggested that he invite him to dinner. . . . She did not know whether Monsieur le Gouverneur and the others were aware she would be present. Nevertheless, they had accepted, and whatever happened, she was sufficiently

mistress of herself, or any situation, to keep this triumph from turning into anything else. Furthermore, Frenchmen were very liberal where their wives were not concerned, and even where they were concerned it was not a matter of intolerance but a greater liberalism that included also the peculiarities of the women to whom they were married.

How inconspicuously this triumph had come! For eight years she had been working for it, not the actual dinner but what it symbolized; and suddenly, with no trumpetry to forecast it, it had come. But that was the way significant events happened—easily, simply. For a moment she reflected bitterly on those two words —easily, simply. Consciously striving for eight years —and blindly for how many before that? Many; since she had been a child; since she had first looked at illustrated journals and learned there was a world beyond Stung-Treng—a world whose blood she shared. Easily, simply?

Not those years of striving . . . those years at Stung-Treng, unfolding to the magic of Kim Khouan, then disillusion . . . taking refuge in Justin . . . the coming to Saïgon . . . Paul, the war . . . and then that morning in the barracks. Ages ago. And as she had fainted, stunned by the news of Kim Khouan's death, she had thought of a vase crashing to the floor. Fragments of glowing white porcelain. She had picked them up afterward, and put them together; and they had gleamed with the same shining beauty, only

something had spilled. Fertile soil turned to sand. . . . in its place a polished luster.

But tonight, she thought, I dine with Monsieur le Gouverneur. . . . All those years . . . simply part of the price of becoming civilized. . . . Civilized; she repeated the word vehemently. I am civilized, am I not?

Yes . . . but long ago . . . in a native tunic . . . to find a brown man . . . dirty brown fellow, the French would say . . . whom another governor had flung into the mud of Europe . . . and when she had learned . . . had shattered like a vase . . . long ago . . . so painfully long ago. . . .

And after that? . . . Utterly alone. . . . No Kim Khouan to fold warmly and darkly about her thoughts. . . . No Justin to offer refuge. . . . No Paul in whom she could submerge herself. . . . After all . . . Kim Khouan . . . her only love. . . . An Annamite—and he was dead. . . . White was the color of mourning. . . . And so, in remembrance of him who was an Annamite, she had worn white in her heart. . . .

Thoughts pitting the surface of her mind like rain.

And with that mourning in her heart she had gone to work. . . . Sitting behind the caisse in the Hotel de la Rotonde . . . a high caisse from which she could look down on those who occupied the tables. . . . Civilians in stiff whites . . . soldiers in khaki . . . women complaining of the heat. . . . She had felt very wise, sitting there above them . . . so wise that

she had allowed only a few actual beings to emerge from that pattern of faces that shifted about her daily. . . .

Only a few. . . . That young lieutenant who was going to marry a girl in France . . . who was so pathetically young and lonely. . . . And the American who had an office over on the Boulevard Charner. . . . And Jeannerat . . . Jeannerat—hardly more than a boy . . . little Breton sailor. . . . Looking up from the caisse one evening, she had seen him laughing at her from the street . . . and later when she came out he was still there, laughing. . . . "I am never going away," he had declared. . . . How prophetic! . . . Curly hair of him tangled in the roots of the cemetery. . . . Out of that earth the fever had crept, stealing back with him. . . . Jeannerat . . . who had left her that little bag filled with soiled, wrinkled francs . . . who had wanted to marry her but instead had celebrated a more permanent and ironic marriage. . . .

And then the shop she had opened on the Rue Catinat . . . very little in it at first . . . but soon sampots, embroidered hangings from Hanoi . . . Annamite needlework . . . Laotian scarfs and sinhs that Mama Thi-Bao sent down from Stung-Treng . . . carvings, bronzes, Buddhas . . . things for tourists to buy. . . . And Hoa to help her, faithful Hoa, who reminded her of Mama Thi-Bao as she sat chewing betel in the rear of the shop. . . .

Business had flourished. . . . Many people came

. . . travelers . . . officers from foreign ships . . . among them that young Scandinavian who had taken her to the dansant at the Continental. . . . Her first dansant . . . music pouring over her, the warm drench of lights. . . . Ah! how she had wished that Paul might see her that afternoon. . . . But Paul was in France. . . .

Other dansants had followed. . . . What did it matter that women stared and made nasty remarks? . . . Men took her there . . . danced with her. . . .

And then that eventful trip to Hanoi . . . trip to buy things for the shop. . . . A room in the best hotel . . . evenings in the open-air café, smoking and drinking aperitifs . . . watching the cinema that flickered across the street. . . . It was sitting there one night that she first saw Monsieur Chauvet. . . .

She sighed deeply, checking those staccato thoughts that rained upon her mind.

The two years following that meeting at Hanoi had been calm, a steady rise upward bringing her to this night when the Governor would dine at her house. She could regard those years coolly. They had seemed to rinse her of the hot film left by emotional tumult. And that meeting—it had come so easily. Sitting there in the café at Hanoi, she was suddenly aware of Monsieur Chauvet's intense, nervous gaze. But she did not speak, or even give evidence that she saw him. He wore glasses fastened to a thin black ribbon; his white beard was close-cropped, his clothing immaculate.

A stomach a bit too large, but that was to be expected in a man his age.

The next evening the manager of the hotel approached her table with tolerant good nature, and behind him walked the gentleman with the close-cropped white beard whom he introduced as Monsieur Urbain Chauvet of the Banque de l'Indo-Chine.

Thinking about it now, it seemed to Thi-Linh that he had an air of destiny as he sat down at her table that night in Hanoi. They dined together. The next evening he came with a scarlet flower in his lapel. His wife had died several years past, he told her; he had been living alone since then. . . . It seemed that she was hearing ancient words that had lain under her consciousness and were only then emerging. When he had finished, her only answer was a smile, a tired little smile. Later, when he kissed her, a quiver traveled down her backbone. But she would get over that, she had assured herself.

And so she had sent a telegram to Hoa, following the message herself and selling out the shop; and then, accompanied by Hoa, she had returned to Hanoi.

She had not abandoned her ideal of the physical male, and during the first few months with Monsieur Chauvet she had invariably felt depressed when she regarded his stomach. But as his little habits and eccentricities became more familiar to her, this defect in his figure became less obvious, and she became aware of the growing warmth that comes with continued asso-

ciation no matter how unromantic. He was exceedingly shrewd and generally good-natured. But he was also very jealous. She admired his intelligence, and the fact that he was rarely out of humor made it easier for her to forget that he was nearly twice her age. But it was most distressing when he indulged in a fit of jealousy.

Unfortunately those spells usually came in public. Suddenly he would accuse her of watching some man too closely, and no matter where they happened to be, he would loudly call for a carriage or a motorcar, announcing with equal loudness that he was going to take her home. For an hour or more he would be very insulting, questioning her fidelity and charging her with preposterous indiscretions, and then he would go storming to his room and shut himself up for the rest of the day. Always on the following morning he would suggest casually that she needed a new dress.

Often he would invite friends to dinner—men of course—and beforehand he would tell her, "You must talk tonight—you must show them how clever you are." But if her conversation led her to be too gracious he was very irritable afterward. "You talked to him too much," he would complain. "What was it, the uniform or the handsome face? My God, why must I be so old?"

When he was pleased with her he would stroke his beard and call her "his wise little peacock." It sounded stupid and senile, and it grew to annoy her.

And then they moved to Saïgon. She was glad to be back, for there was a charm about the city stronger than the bitter suggestions of the past that lurked in certain parts of it. He had a large house beyond the Place de la Cathédrale, and many servants; and in addition to the car which he had shipped down from Hanoi, he bought another which he said was her very own. He also allowed her a personal chauffeur.

Her days were very full. From the imprimerie on the Rue Catinat she was able to get the latest books, and she read most of the new novels; novels by André Gide, Claude Farrère, Paul Morand, Pierre Benoit and many others. But she was not satisfied with reading only novels; she read much about the history of her country and of other countries as well.

And when the opera came to Saïgon she had a box. Most of the Frenchmen said the troupe sang very badly, but she observed that in spite of that they never missed a performance. One did not go to the opera to hear music, she learned, at least not in Saïgon; one went because the socially eligible would be there. Nevertheless, she enjoyed the singing. One performance, particularly, aroused her tremendously. It was about a Spanish dancer. Castanets shrilled through it, and the music welled up like blood, making hot revelry in her brain.

This opera disturbed her. Afterward, while she and Monsieur Chauvet were riding along the quays for a breath of air, she was painfully aware of his lack of

physical grace. The dark silence over the river, tongued with lights, the pale roads, where people moved in a stealthy pattern, challenged her to dismiss the car, Monsieur Chauvet included, and walk, walk, walk until she was exhausted. That, she felt, would have sublimated all her restlessness.

It was her habit to go to the cinema twice a week. Often those films, like that Spanish opera, left her passionately dissatisfied. Was it, she wondered, because in most of them the men were young and handsome? Romance—was it that she wanted? She did not think so. Long ago she had had romance; and because of it all the fertile soil of her had turned to sand and run out, leaving that cold luster. No, it was not romance. But it was something . . . something even more intangible and which at times she craved with insuperable and exquisite anguish.

Monsieur Chauvet (she never called him Urbain) was very generous. He allowed her to go to the weekly thé-dansants at the Continental. But even they sometimes left her with that excruciating discontent. Her car would take her to the hotel, and she would go to the table reserved for her. But she never had to sit alone. Always some young Frenchman, one or more, would join her, and her dances were filled. Then, the dansant over, she would go out to her waiting car, followed by insolent glances from the women, and return home, there to be questioned in detail by Monsieur Chauvet.

Pleasant days. . . . And her gratitude to Monsieur Chauvet developed into a warm affection—an affection, in a lesser degree, such as she had for Mama Thi-Bao and little Justin. Which, she realized, would not entirely please him if he knew it.

But there were moments, riding along the docks at dusk or in some thickly peopled street, when a passing face would seem to rise up and touch her poignantly. Flashes of yearning, reminiscent of those nights when she first came to Saïgon. But her fidelity was complete.

Eight years since that morning at the barracks, she reflected again. And had they been easy and simple? . . . Eight crowded years, each circumstance a step that she had mounted with the sureness of one following a design.

Now, sitting in her car and thinking of those years, the remark of that Frenchman seemed ridiculous. And equally absurd was the fact that she had permitted it to upset her. She could see no reason why everything should not continue as it had been for the past two years.

Monsieur Chauvet seemed extravagantly proud of her, and in return she held nothing from him. Nothing . . . except those sharp, scattered moments; and they were her own; precious moments, close to life, when a hint of that old prodigality of emotion stemmed a swift, fragile bloom.

3

When she entered the hall she found Monsieur Chauvet waiting, dressed in evening clothes and nervously adjusting his nose-glasses as he paced the floor.

"And who was the handsome young man who made you late?" he demanded with forced joviality.

She kissed him automatically. "I took a drive afterward to clear my mind of all those silly faces."

He laughed—still uncertain. "Whom did you dance with?"

"The usual ones. . . ."

"Was Lieutenant de Brissac there?"

She smiled tolerantly. "Yes, he was there—and he danced with me twice. I suggest that you meet him tomorrow morning in the Botanical Gardens, swords preferably."

His laugh was genuine now; he kissed her. "Hurry, it is late."

She stopped to look into the dining-room. Candles burned on the table, and their light defined dark hangings and spaciousness. Between them was a savage splash of hibiscus, reflecting a winey shimmer in the empty glasses. One of the serving-boys moved about soundlessly, hovering over silverware and heavily embroidered linen.

Hoa was waiting in her room. Immediately she began to denounce Thi-Linh for being late. "Have

you forgotten that Monsieur le Gouverneur is to be here?" she demanded.

Hoa was a privileged person. She had been with Thi-Linh since the days of the shop in the Rue Catinat. Thi-Linh submitted to the tyranny of her guardianship because a shadow of Mama Thi-Bao lurked in her face and dress. But aside from her appearance she was quite unlike Mama Thi-Bao. She was a common peasant woman from Mytho, and at times her manners were very inelegant. If, for instance, she became angry, she would promptly sit down, no matter where she was, and loudly recite her grievances for the benefit of whoever happened to be passing and for the world at large. Although Hoa did not talk outside the house, very little of interest happened in Saïgon that did not ultimately reach Thi-Linh through her.

"Have you forgotten that Monsieur le Gouverneur is coming?" she repeated with rising inflection when Thi-Linh did not answer.

Thi-Linh gazed at a smear on the floor, then at Hoa. "You have been chewing betel again," she accused.

Hoa looked guilty. "It must have been the house-boy," she said.

"The house-boy does not defile himself with such a filthy habit; and if you do it again I shall send you back to your village. . . . Unhook me," she ordered sharply.

As she slipped out of her dress she thought of what Hoa had said about forgetting that the Governor was to be there. Forget! For his benefit she had bought a new gown at the magasin on the Boulevard Charner, and because of him she deliberately planned to be late. That gown would show off to excellent effect as she descended the long stair, with the guests assembled below.

It was an exquisite gown; and it emphasized a certain glowing fragility in her beauty. Sunk in the misty whiteness of it, and gazing at herself in the mirror, she experienced a sensation of acute pleasure. That dress made her pallor seem as if golden smoke had been breathed over it. "Get me a hibiscus," she said to Hoa. When the old woman brought the flower, she crushed it into her hair, against the temple. It was a barbaric touch, and she liked it blazing there in the rippling blue-black of her short-trimmed hair.

When she moved, the dress floated out about her. It made her think of the soft wash of spume over coral rock. Several times she strode back and forth in front of the glass, smiling at her reflection with lips heavy with carmine.

"Am I not beautiful?" she demanded of Hoa.

"Beautiful as a mimosa flower," crooned the old woman.

"Bring me my bracelets." She slipped them over one wrist. Silver, made bluish by sapphires. An Annamite would never wear silver unless in mourning,

she reflected; the fact that she did was proof of the dominance of her French blood. "Do I not look like a Frenchwoman?"

"You are lovelier than Frenchwomen," Hoa replied tactfully.

A sudden passionate charge made Thi-Linh's supple body rigid. Eight years; and all the concerted discord of them crashing up to this attenuated moment. For an instant she felt dizzy. Her image blurred in the mirror, then blossomed in all its smooth perfection.

"I wish they could see me tonight, those Frenchwomen," she said. "Is it not a triumph, Hoa? Dining with Monsieur le Gouverneur—Marie Linh, whose father was French, whose mother is Annamite. Hoa," she commanded abruptly, "it seems—tonight—as though something dark is here—here in me—perhaps it is Indo-China—laughing behind this French manner. Not sultry and brooding, Hoa, because Indo-China is too wise, but laughing. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"You are hating the French," said the old woman quietly.

A sense of futility caught back the laugh that rose in Thi-Linh's throat.

"Hating! You are a stupid baya, Hoa. Not hating, no, but pitying, pitying as I laugh—pitying Indo-China—pitying France—pitying the ineffectualness of this—this triumph."

For a moment a terrific dissatisfaction shook her. To herself she said: What will it mean tomorrow, this dinner tonight? Simply that all those French strumpets will hear of it, and their tongues will leap like snakes; and what they say will come to me, and their jealousy will delight me for a while. And I shall go on dining with their men, and dancing with them; and—and then?

"Give me a cigarette," she demanded.

She could hear voices rising from below, muffled; in a moment she would join them.

Annoyed with herself, she paced up and down the room, spheres of smoke drifting up from her lips. Hoa watched her with a puzzled, dull look that added to her irritation.

"Get out," she said tersely; then, "Wait—am I all right?"

"Lovely as—"

"Get out!"

As the woman went, Thi-Linh studied herself in the glass. A mimosa? Hardly. More like that flower crushed against her temple. Its petals seemed to beat there like throbs of blood. It was a blossom of insuperable brutality. With that against her temple, she thought, she could be equally savage. But how white and chaste she looked in the clinging gossamer of that dress! A virgin with one flare of lust against her temple. What a paradox, a virgin! And yet, centuries ago, in the temples of her Ancestors, there were ves-

tals who attained the gods through priestly intercessors; courtezans in body but in spirit perpetually wedded to heaven. Was it possible, she wondered, to give freely, not promiscuously, and keep deep in the heart a more vital chastity? For an instant she had the feeling that all the shimmering whiteness of her gathered momentum and spun ahead, bearing on its crest an incredible bloom that was her gift to ironic destiny.

A gong sounded faintly. That would be Monsieur Chauvet ringing for the cocktails. She would go now.

Stamping the cigarette on the tiled floor, she moved to the stairway.

As she swept down, the tumultuous beating of her heart seemed to race through her entire body. She could see faces lifted toward her. A little shiver of exultation responded. She could picture her descent. How old am I? she thought irrelevantly. Twenty-nine? Ten years ago I could not have done this.

On the bottom step she paused, and with a soft clash of bracelets, she pressed her hand tentatively against that flower in her hair, all the while smiling serenely at those faces that swiftly were becoming more definite.

Monsieur Chauvet advanced with a look of anxious benevolence.

"Ah!" he said, and she thought his voice sounded agitated. Was he afraid of how she would be received? She experienced an instant of dread. "Ah!"

he repeated, clearing his throat. "Gentlemen, I think all of you know my wise little peacock—all except Monsieur le Gouverneur."

She saw a swarthy, kind-looking little man with a gray mustache. Doctor Martel, the Governor; she had seen him often at public functions.

He inclined his head forward. "Madame," he said in gracious acknowledgment.

Later, at the table, it all seemed so natural; Monsieur le Gouverneur on her right and Monsieur le Préfet de Police on her left. Monsieur Chauvet's white beard flickered at the other end of the table, above the piled hibiscus. Their lustful color reduced him to ashy remoteness. She had never before realized how old he looked. Not even the vitality of his eyes could atone for the life those flowers drained from him. Dead ivory holding together a bronze chain of faces. Her casual gaze moved about the table as she talked. Most of the men were middle-aged, one or two young, but all had the luster of living. All except Monsieur Chauvet. Suddenly he had become pitifully grotesque, and so very old.

One of the serving-boys entered soundlessly with an elaborate dish: a great pinkish-silver fish congealed in transparent amber with rinds of lemon and pimento. From outside came warm fragrances that mingled with the smell of burning tapers. Another boy made the wine-glasses seem burnished. The voices mounted to a staccato dissonance that almost drowned the occa-

sional shrilling of a lizard on the ceiling. Thi-Linh's senses blurred with pleasure.

"These Chinese are amusing devils," an elderly man near the other end of the table was saying. "My compradore . . . he was describing the executions in Yunnan. . . . He said the condemned men simply knelt down and the executioner walked along the line chopping off their heads; and I said, 'But I don't see why some of them don't move their heads out of the way'; and he looked immensely serious and said, 'Ah, no, monsieur . . . lose face if they do that!' . . . Incomparable, eh?"

Monsieur Chauvet began telling an anecdote, laughing in anticipation of the point.

Red wine suffused the glasses now; following the fish-gelatin had come a great silver platter of cock's-combs imported from France.

" . . . perambulating journalists are a nuisance," remarked a dark-bearded man next to Monsieur le Gouverneur. "They come with letters and expect the Government to prostrate itself! There is a joke—" He glanced slily at the Governor. The latter laughed.

"Go ahead, my dear Armand," he shrugged.

"There is a joke on Monsieur le Gouverneur," resumed the dark-bearded man who was a cabinet official.

"It happened about a year ago," volunteered the Governor; "no, longer than that—"

"Some journalist came with a letter from the Min-

ister at Peking," continued the cabinet official. "His Excellency was very busy—"

"Busy!" exploded the Governor. "I was more than busy! It was at the time of General Fournereau's visit! Could I neglect official duty for a journalist?"

"Consequently," went on the cabinet official, "this journalist visited the sights in a car that cost twenty piastres a day instead of having a Government motor at his disposal. When he reached Paris—he knew someone in the cabinet—he stamped like an angry bull. And so—"

"And so I received a letter," interposed Monsieur le Gouverneur, "politely requesting me to be more considerate of journalists in the future because, the letter said, Indo-China needed publicity!"

"Then," the other pressed on, "an American writer appeared about eight months ago, immediately after the letter from Paris. Naturally—"

"Naturally," broke in the Governor, "I exerted every power to make sure that, as Paris had requested, Indo-China should receive more publicity!"

"His Excellency gave this gentleman a car to use here and at Phnom-Penh," the cabinet official persisted, "and when he went to Hanoi—"

"I telegraphed the Governor," His Excellency continued excitedly, "and he arranged for this writer to have his private boat for a visit to the Baie d'Along."

"Every courtesy!" emphasized the cabinet official,

seizing the pause. "And when he returned to America—"

"Yes, when he returned to America," the Governor interjected, his face flushed, "what did he do?"

He paused to take a swallow of wine, and the cabinet official plunged on desperately.

"He wrote an article attacking the Colonial Government of Indo-China!"

"Yes!" inserted the Governor, having swallowed the wine. "And he called it 'The Exquisite Jest'!"

"Very bitter, very caustic!" said the cabinet official in a last valiant effort to finish his own story. "I remember the concluding line—"

"Indeed, so do I!" shouted the Governor. "Listen, this was it—" He paused, but the cabinet official only opened his mouth and then shut it with a snap.

"He said," quoted the Governor, " 'If the natives of Indo-China had a sense of humor, they would appreciate the elaborate pretensions of Frenchmen, and their convulsive laughter would completely unseat their masters, who, contrary to popular belief, are not at their best when the joke is of a personal nature!' "

The air had grown heavier, as though the mingling of fragrances from the garden, the heat of candles and all those human breaths sagged upon it. Sparkling golden chill of Perrier-Jouet frosted the glasses; a boy moved quietly from elbow to elbow with a dish of fowl drenched in sherry.

Thi-Linh's mind was abnormally alert, and the quenching warmth of champagne seemed to multiply glittering words that ran from her tongue easily. Most of her conversation was with the Governor, but now and then she addressed the Prefect of Police, who had an annoying way of listening with smiling vacuity. Yet when she turned away she was conscious of his close scrutiny.

She had seen him about town often; several months before, Monsieur Chauvet had introduced them. He had a thin face burned the color of dried cowhide, with a small mustache, and sinewy wrists that moved with arresting flexibility. His impassiveness, amounting almost to austerity, gave her the feeling that the man himself was carefully encased in leather. Even when he smiled vacantly his eyes had a penetrating directness. He alone, of all those men at the table, seemed hostile to her; and his hostility took the form of an unspoken skepticism that questioned her intelligence. Evidently, she thought, the women he had known outside French circles were all like Nanette.

A young officer new to Indo-China was talking about Algeria. Silently she accepted the challenge of the Prefect of Police.

"You were long in Algeria?" she inserted deftly.

Monsieur Chauvet was telling a joke about a hare-lipped nun, chuckling as he talked.

"Two years, madame," replied the young officer.

"I only know the country through 'Le Roman d'un Spahi,' " she said tentatively.

"Which is, perhaps, inadequately," he returned. "For Monsieur Loti saw flowers where flowers were not." After a pause he added laughingly, "And I assure you, madame, that all officers do not consort with black Fatou-gayes!"

An abrupt silence descended upon his speech. Monsieur Chauvet, in the midst of his story, paused with an injured look. Thi-Linh was conscious that the attention of the entire table was upon her; a subtle tension tightened the air. It suggested to her what was going on behind all those faces. They were associating her with those African women, black creatures and mulatto wenches who were the mistresses of Spahis and other soldiers. Involuntarily her hand went to the flower in her hair. The touch seemed to impart a velvety coolness to her fingers. A well-poised cruelty balanced her emotions, and she assorted her words with the care of one choosing stones for a catapult.

"But in spite of seeing flowers where flowers were not," she pronounced evenly, "Monsieur Loti made savage music out of Africa—sometimes ironic music, with a little tremulous obbligato"—she smiled—"that, perhaps, is the loneliness of Frenchmen in exile."

After a brief silence an elderly man at the other end of the table snorted:

"Loti! Pouf! A young naval officer observing the

world from the quarter-deck! A sailor with a penchant for exaggeration!"

Monsieur Chauvet gave Thi-Linh an apologetic look. "I prefer the style of Anatole France—" he began.

She ignored him. "Perhaps Loti exaggerated details," she said, "but not moods. In spite of being French, he was able to catch the nostalgic beauty of Asia. Indeed, in his habits he was extremely French—Fatou-gaye, Suleima, Aziyade; how many were there?—but his reactions, when he put them on paper, were undeniably Eastern. Now of course"—she paused, running her fingers over the stem of her wine-glass—"he seems a bit archaic. For in these days Fatou-gaye doesn't kill herself, she gets another Frenchman." And she smiled deliberately and distractingly.

Several of the men laughed—hollowly. The Prefect of Police sat so rigid in his brown casing that she expected to hear a leathery creak when he moved. Monsieur Chauvet looked a bit distressed—as though she had said something very personal.

Suddenly the Prefect of Police spoke; indeed, so suddenly that Thi-Linh almost jumped.

"Quite so." His black interrogative gaze smiled at her—or was it laughter? "Has madame, by any chance, read a book called 'Une Fille d'Annam'?"

His question clashed against her, like steel suddenly thrust out of that leather casing. She met the direct focus of his black pupils with a smile.

"A beautiful book," she said.

"But the psychology?"

"It cannot be questioned up to the point where the girl throws herself into the sea." Then she added, "But, you see, I am prejudiced in its favor—it was dedicated to me."

After she spoke she felt Monsieur Chauvet's jealous gaze. She did not look at him, but continued to smile at the Prefect of Police. He also was smiling, with that polite attention that so annoyed her.

Talk commenced at the other end of the table. She transferred her attention to the young officer from Algeria.

"Speaking of Africa," she began, "there was a book—by René Maran—called 'Batouala.'"

"'Batouala'!" burst out one of the Frenchmen near her. "Hot words written by a Negro! It is stupid—it is too bitter—it is merely ridiculous!"

She was pleased, for she had thought that mention of "Batouala" would bring a heated reaction.

"Its violence made it ineffectual," she said. "If Monsieur Maran had been a European instead of a Negro, his bitterness would have taken the form of satire. Or if he had had some French blood instead of merely a French education—" She paused, aware that she was spinning over fire, yet sure of herself. "Then," she finished, "he would have written with more artistic despair and less obvious purpose. . . ."

"Exactly," came Monsieur Chauvet's voice from the

other end of the table. His eyes were still asking her about "Une Fille d'Annam."

"Consider the other extreme," she continued, not satisfied; "that novel of Pierre Benoit's, 'L'Atlantide.' "

"Merely a romancer, Benoit," pronounced the Frenchman who had been so vehement about "Batouala."

"But he is also very French," replied Thi-Linh. "For him, Africa is—well, grist for his literary mill. He is fantastic, his story impossible. Monsieur Maran is bitter, his story not impossible but improbable. There we have the two, native and Frenchman, both writing about a continent—and neither a great artist."

The Prefect of Police spoke again. "You are suggesting?"

"Simply that Monsieur Loti, compared with the other two, is more artistic. And more truthful, paradoxical as that seems. He interpreted the moods of the East—of Indo-China as well as Africa—with passionate felicity—perhaps because, in spite of being born a Frenchman, he was, emotionally, a strange blending of both Oriental and Occidental."

The conversation at the other end of the table had grown into a rapid discussion. In the midst of this dissonance of talk she heard Monsieur Chauvet resume his story of the harelipped nun.

Coffee and brandy were served in the living-room. It gave upon an enclosed veranda beyond which the dark contours of the garden were visible, made misty

by the wire screen. The concerted humming of insects drifted in, carried on a breath of flowers. Monsieur Chauvet, the Governor, and several others were gathered into an earnest group, their faces enveloped in bluish smoke. Thi-Linh was talking with the officer from Algeria.

The Prefect of Police had wandered out on the veranda and was gazing into the garden. But presently he turned, deliberately crossing the room to where she sat.

She looked up at him with veiled insolence; whatever his attitude now, his challenge at the table could not easily be forgotten.

"A charming garden, madame," he announced conventionally.

"Some of the flowers came from Japan—and one camelia plant was brought from Peking."

"Ah, Peking," he murmured reflectively. His smile was like sunlight on leather. "Roses, mimosa, agaves, acacias, palms—an exquisite ensemble, with just enough thorny growth to make it interesting. Such a garden is the perfection of desire."

Thi-Linh lighted a cigarette. Poor dead Nanette, she thought irrelevantly, if she could see me tonight! For a moment she studied the ascending smoke.

"I doubt if anyone ever attains the perfection of desire," she began slowly. "Desire is too transient, perfection too much a matter of mood. Do you not think so?"

The young officer, feeling himself excluded, strolled across the room and pretended to examine a picture.

"Perhaps," said the Prefect of Police.

He was studying her openly—and there was something relaxed and languid behind his gaze now. He was, she decided, a very rude Frenchman.

"May I be brutally candid, madame?" he commenced suddenly.

"Is not that the privilege of Monsieur le Préfet de Police?"

He shrugged. "You remind me of someone." There was a long pause before he went on. "Many years ago, in Peking, I saw a woman. . . . She rode in a sedan-chair, I think it was yellow, and as she passed down the street, all the Chinese prostrated themselves."

"In a yellow chair?" she repeated.

"A yellow chair."

Thi-Linh expelled the smoke from her nostrils before she said: "The imperial color. . . . Her name was Yehonala?"

"Madame is very erudite." She could not tell whether he was mocking her or not. "It was not because she was an empress that I spoke of her, but because that morning when she passed down the street, I remembered that she virtually ruled the empire when she was twenty-two, and to have done that, she must necessarily have known a great deal about men." He bowed satirically, but she caught a gleam of sincerity

in his direct gaze. "It is the pretense of my department to deal out justice; now and then justice is actual. I assure you, madame, Monsieur Chauvet is to be envied. . . ."

4

Afterward when she thought of that speech it seemed the symbol of her triumph. The entire dinner was a gesture of vanity thrown back to her youth. Actually, now that it was over, it meant little more than this: in the future the Governor, passing her in the street, would speak; she had forced a compliment from the Prefect of Police, who in the beginning had seemed inaccessible; and (the thought came with a certain irony) she had given Monsieur Chauvet the opportunity to be proud of her publicly.

Of course, he had acted ridiculously about "Une Fille d'Annam" after the guests had gone. But it was not a violent scene, for he was too pleased otherwise, and it ended with his stroking her hair and calling her his "wise little peacock."

"You were clever," he had said, "very clever. And, mon Dieu! the way you replied to Chagny's remark about Africa! Even his Excellency was impressed; and Monsieur le Préfet, too. He is a strong man politically, that Prefect; some day he may be Governor of Cochin-China. I am glad you exerted yourself to entertain him." Then he added, "But I trust you were not too engaging."

Triumph, yes; to make those men acknowledge her. Yet it had not given her the exultation she had anticipated. "I doubt if anyone ever attains the perfection of desire." Her own words came back to her with somber conviction. If this had only happened with—with Justin—or Paul—anyone younger—younger than Monsieur Chauvet.

She wondered if her sudden antipathy toward age was the result of her own increasing years. Studying herself in the mirror, she saw no hint of age but a ripe maturity. Yet she had no illusions about her ability to remain young in appearance. She would not fade as quickly as Annamite women, but in a few years that soft gold-flushed skin would begin to sag, and her eyes would lose their intensity of color. She was nearly thirty, and her son (how strange that word seemed!) was—fourteen or fifteen?

Thirty. Suddenly she felt incredibly old, with a multiplicity of experiences that mounted beyond her years. How intolerable that the throbbing beauty of body should become insensible flesh before the ultimate decay! Perhaps it was for this period wise men had created the word "soul."

She was, she realized, at the height of her charm now. Yet she was denied the dignity of a mature passion. But after all, she told herself, she was through with emotional tumult—that had ended long ago.

Monsieur Chauvet had gone to Hanoi on business.

He was making the trip in his car because he could not wait for the next boat; and he would be away about a month. He had told her apologetically that if he had gone by water he would have taken her.

"It will be a quick, rough journey, my dear," he had said. "You would not enjoy it—and I shall be extremely busy in Hanoi." He took her face between his hands and kissed her on the forehead; it shamed her that she was glad he had not kissed her on the lips. "I hate to leave you alone," he added.

"You do not trust me?"

"I trust you—but—well, there are too many charming young men about, always ready to distract." Then he chuckled in an attempt to cover his jealousy. "But you are too wise to be indiscreet—aren't you, little peacock?"

And she said, then, what she had so often thought lately: "I am through with all that."

At first she was annoyed because Monsieur Chauvet did not take her with him; now he had gone, she contented herself with the prospect of several weeks alone, interrupted pleasantly by dansants at the Continental and other amusements.

It was the first time since she had been living with Monsieur Chauvet that she had been by herself in the large house, and she was surprised at her feeling of buoyancy and freedom. It was, on the other hand, a little disconcerting to realize his absence could give her this sense of utter holiday.

Her days were spent idly. As usual, Hoa brought petit-déjeuner to her bedside, and through the morning she lay in the cool shade of rattan blinds, reading or otherwise indolently amusing herself. The crushing forenoon over, she rode among the shops, buying indiscriminately because of her mood; and then, in the late afternoon, she motored to Thu-daumot or Bienhoa. In the evenings she dined alone, with two candles burning on the table; and afterward she went to the cinema, or rode about the city lying back in the open car with the night wind weaving soft silk on her throat.

In one of the exclusive shops she saw a vivid gown from Paris—a warmth of fuchsia kindling in depths of orange barely visible under metal tissue—and she bought it. Naturally it called for an occasion. Therefore, seeing Lieutenant de Brissac sitting in the café of the Continental, it occurred to her to invite him to dinner. But this would be indiscreet. So she decided to invite several others as well, making it a party. Surely Monsieur Chauvet could not object to that.

She told her plan to Hoa. The old woman talked for an hour, trying to persuade her that Monsieur Chauvet would be anything but pleased, but she gave in when Thi-Linh found betel-stains on the floor of her room.

Lieutenant de Brissac would be delighted to come, said his charmingly informal reply. And so would the three other gentlemen whom she asked.

It was an entirely successful dinner party. Lieutenant de Brissac looked pleasantly bronzed in his immaculate uniform, and the other three were most acceptable. She wore the new gown—it seemed to sift a radiant pollen over her. The same glow fused her conversation.

After dinner they played the gramophone and danced; and later they rode out to Cholon in her car, and Lieutenant de Brissac held her hand persuasively. A wistful anguish filled her. It was not the man's touch that stirred her, but something more tenuous—it was the feeling of being close to people. All the lights of the Chinese city swam together, and the surge of bodies in the streets—Cholon never slept—seemed to flow endlessly as if mingling in a precious tryst.

Lieutenant de Brissac made it a point to linger after the other three had told her good night. An uncomfortable silence followed each speech. As he left, the rheumy languor in his eyes made something bend through her like wind-driven flame.

She went into the garden; she was too disturbed to go to bed. A dark plow had turned up the moon—a young moon that seemed tossed into the upper branches of tall cycas-trees and traveler-palms. The foliage made a cask that held hot scent. Unsubstantial noises drifted in from the surrounding city, melting into the vibrations of insects. She had a feeling of shadowy unfolding, as though a flower within her

opened and gave up a prayer of fragrance. All the warm musk that she had drawn from those crowded streets of Cholon, from de Brissac, from the other men, now seemed distilled into the singing quiet. In that moment life rose up to meet her like a swarthy lover, and the moon was his mouth.

In the morning she awakened with a sense of incompleteness. Monsieur Chauvet had been away nearly a week now; could it be that she missed him? It did seem strange with him not about, particularly in the evenings, but she suspected that his absence was not the cause of her vague discontent.

She decided to motor to Cap St. Jacques and spend the night. The hotel there looked out to sea, and one could fall asleep listening to the waves.

It was the middle of the week, and she knew she would find few guests at the hotel. She arrived just before sunset when the vivid cerulean of the China Sea, reflecting the last glare, was burning to ashes of mauve. The wind was sultry and briny. To the east, the dark blue mountains of Annam rode the coast-line, stirring in her a transient curiosity to see the country where her mother had been born.

Sitting alone at dinner—there were only three other tables occupied—she wished, for a moment, that Lieutenant de Brissac were with her. Then she was glad he was not. He was, she decided, infinitely more interesting in her thoughts. If he were there, undoubtedly he would seek to translate the look she had seen

in his eyes the previous night; and this, she reflected, would spoil the illusion. What illusion? she asked herself immediately. Certainly she had none concerning him or his motives where she was concerned. But the night before, as he left, he had imparted to her a sense of husky emotional intensity that she did not want destroyed. It could never occur again. Men, when they desired, often were capable of an exquisite and intangible beauty which rarely survived constant association or consummation.

After dinner she walked down to the shore. The soft incoming rush of the water made an organ pulse under the sand. When she closed her eyes it sounded even louder. It was the music of ships far out and invisible in the darkness, some of which glided by the mouth of the river without their crews and passengers knowing that a few miles up the stream was the beginning of a country which made up the entire world for millions of people, herself included.

She felt a sudden desperate futility. Would she ever escape this small world? Never before had she consciously wanted to; of course she had dreamed of going to France, but always behind this dream was the knowledge that if she went she would return. Now the thought of those invisible ships aroused an aching desire to get away—anywhere. To live fully, swiftly, was not that better than slowly drifting into old age?

For an instant her longing was so transcendent that

she became, in fancy, a spirit enclosing all those ships that stole by, far off in the night; men were in her, their bare torsos dripping and blood-flushed with the light of incredible furnaces; and all their groping desires, their torments and joys were hers; emotions that lived an eternity of fulfilment in the hope, born of whatever circumstances, that had thrust them into those ships which, in this moment, she seemed to draw into herself.

She was glad to get back to town the next morning. Yet she was lonely. It occurred to her that she might go to see Mama Thi-Bao and little Justin, but Stung-Treng, she knew, would only increase her depression. Suddenly she wanted passionately to see her son. It was a wish she had learned through habit to suppress, but now and then it sprung up fiercely. If she sent for him, he could come and leave before Monsieur Chauvet returned. Monsieur Chauvet did not know he existed. If she had told him, it would only have resulted in unnecessary unpleasantness.

That very day she wrote to Mama Thi-Bao and enclosed money for Justin's passage.

Justin—her son—no longer little. How would he look? Brown and slim, like Kim Khouan? Or, as he had grown, had he become pale, like herself? She had a picture of him, hidden in an old trunk—it was taken when he was eleven. A thin, dark little boy with shy eyes and the hint of a melancholy smile in his sober gaze. Thinking about him frightened her

a little. When he came, how would she act? How would he act? What would they talk about?

Mama Thi-Bao had written that for a while he had helped Vu-Trong-Khai in the shop, but the father at the Mission had interested him in studying for the Service Télégrafique, so that when he grew older he could have a position with the Government. In her last letter she had said that the commissaire had taken an interest in Justin, and a position was assured.

Poor Mama Thi-Bao . . . still sitting on that platform in the rear of the shop, chewing betel and dreaming of the past? Perhaps a little sifting of white in her hair. . . . Justin would tell her all about Mama Thi-Bao. And he would come within two weeks.

5

Several days later Lieutenant de Brissac asked to take Thi-Linh to a Rugby match between the army and navy teams.

She went. It had rained that morning, and the game was played amidst sprays of mud squashed up from seemingly innocent stretches of grass. Several Algerian Negroes were on one team, and the features of the Frenchmen, sweat-drenched and muddy, were scarcely distinguishable from those of the black men. Swarthy faces swooped and tumbled above a writhe of muscle, as if impelled by the shouting from the stadium.

When the game was over one Frenchman—or was he an Algerian?—was borne off the field above a rush of arms and heads, his sweater torn and hanging from one bare, soiled shoulder, his face darkly grotesque; an ooze-spattered effigy that the sun painted red and pressed into Thi-Linh's mind.

There had been, she thought, something intentionally violent about the game, reaching a climax in the dirty, tattered hero carried on the shoulders of shouting men; a figure that, no matter how muddy or ridiculous actually, was the idol of the cheering crowd.

That exaltation of physical skill awakened her to something she had not fully realized before. She perceived a menace in that absurdly battered figure reflecting the ruddy west. It was like seeing France in a new light.

She could not help contrasting this game with the mild, almost effeminate sports enjoyed by the better class Annamites. This Rugby match had been so consciously virile and competitive. And there was a presagement in the coating of mud that made white men the color of brown men. The fact that those brown men were Algerians instead of Annamites, or any other people of Indo-China, did not rob the illusion of its significance. Algeria, as well as Indo-China, was a French colony. Were these vigorous Frenchmen, with their instinct of active competition and ideas of physical perfection without the impulse of beauty,

slowly forcing their virile culture upon the people they governed?

She had enjoyed watching the game. But that was a symptom to increase her fears. She did not belong to the Indo-China that the Imperial Court at Hué represented, an Indo-China slowly expiring; she belonged to this period of infusion, when French blood, ideas, and culture were mingling with the blood, ideas, and culture of the country.

She knew that some of the ancient sports of Annam were deliberately cruel, but it was studied brutality and not the spontaneous expression of national vitality such as European sports were. There seemed something imminently threatening in the idea. France awakening the muscles of Indo-China; injecting new ideas into the nerves that controlled them; even giving them blood. The old Indo-China, exemplified by her mother, and the passing of which was coincident with herself, would be gone in another fifty years. Then, perhaps, it might not be Indo-China at all, but New France. Justin, her son, would be in the first generation of that country.

In the past, intelligence and literary skill were the virtues most respected; muscular development belonged to the people who served and entertained the higher caste, or those who made a living by labor or trade. India ink and brush were the symbols of power. But in this new Indo-China virtue would be in thews and biceps, in quick wit that triumphed over commer-

cial adversaries; and the symbols, whatever visible forms they took on, would be vital and progressive.

Suddenly she realized the tremendous physical resources of Indo-China. "It is one of the richest spots in Asia," Monsieur Chauvet had often remarked. Because of these resources, exploited by Frenchmen, he was here, one of the directors of a great bank; and because of them she possessed her clothes—all that she had.

The slow, uncoiling strength of Indo-China! Rich life in the arteries of her, substance in her drowsy muscles!

Why had she never thought of it before? A muddy, torn figure carried from a field above cheering men; and suddenly it had come to her.

Coolies in the mines, like figures of running jet; peasants in the rice-fields, transplanting green shoots or harvesting; fleets of junks swooping along the coast like flocks of gulls; naked brown savages tapping the rubber groves; women in the factories; fierce-looking men drifting down the rivers on floes of teakwood; bare, dripping bodies drawing in trapped silver in nets that writhed with life; and in the cities, thousands of shops where deft hands worked the looms and shaped bronze and precious metals. Swarthy muscles of Indo-China, those men and women; France the brain. Soldiers of commerce deployed from coast to coast, and through the jungles. White men on rubber plantations; directing copra mills; rice plants; tin and coal

mines; a hundred other industries; all grinding out material that fell into the mold of piastres. In that process Indo-China also was being transformed. Would it eventually absorb the French? Or would Annamites, Cambodians, Tonkinese, Cochin-Chinese, and Laotians ultimately become European bodies with Asiatic hearts?

Frenchmen. How they had fought for this colony of theirs! Blood and guns; piracy; dysentery; fever; disease of all kinds. Bodies fertilizing the soil from which future French dreams would grow. Thousands of sun-burned white men—and from them, sunburned souls. Colonial children. Some born of native women, but all touched by the dark influence of an alien continent.

New France? Or new Indo-China?

She could see her country entering into an entirely different phase, as vigorously competitive as that Rugby match, with the battered victor borne high above a demonstrative multitude and carried into the face of the setting sun.

6

She received a telegram from Justin saying that Mama Thi-Bao was ill and she did not want him to leave until she was better; he would come later.

It was a bitter disappointment. It meant that she would not see him for a long while, for she could not have him when Monsieur Chauvet returned, unless he

stayed elsewhere in the city and they met outside the house. The fact that he was unable to come, together with Mama Thi-Bao's illness, brewed a melancholy over her thoughts.

It was Wednesday afternoon when she received the telegram—the afternoon of the dansant at the Continental. She had no desire to go, but the quiet of the house was unendurable. Perhaps the music, and the tense, hot air shot with smoke, smells, and talk would drown her mood.

Lieutenant de Brissac was there, seated with several other Frenchmen, and he joined her, followed by the jealous, half-contemptuous smiles of women. She scarcely heard his conversation. His flushed, handsome face was an effigy made dimmer by the smoke from the cigarettes he smoked constantly when not dancing.

When it was over, he rode home with her, lingering in the hope she would ask him to stay to dinner. She did not want him—nor did she want to be alone. She chose the loneliness. His breath was heavy with liquor, and the languor in his eyes had deepened.

She would, she told herself as she dined alone, be glad when Monsieur Chauvet returned; at least there would be someone in the house.

After the meal she sat in the pale spaciousness of the living-room smoking. Lizards pursued insects over the ceiling; from the screened veranda came a faint, scented breeze. The moon would be up, she

thought. Perhaps it would be better to ride: the people, the wind along the river. . . .

She rode past the cathedral, down the Rue Catinat. The soft whir of rickshaw wheels; now and then the hollow blatance of a motor horn. On the sidewalks, sauntering shapes—the glow of a white suit, a passing naked back as oily as though anointed. The Indian shops were open, splashing the pavements with light. Black Chettis sat imperturbably in the money-changers' shops, watching the people who passed. But the languid activity of the streets did not arouse her from her mood. She wanted spaces, winds.

A complete immobility masked the river, intensified by the quiver of lamps along the shore and in midstream. Sampans skulled close to the bank; at intervals shrill voices raveled the quiet.

The Marine Barracks glided past; the Botanical Gardens swept by a little faster. The chauffeur, as though sensing her mood, had pressed down the accelerator. She called directions to him, the wind rushing between her lips.

The town was fraying out into a suburb where the only lights were from scattered huts. Natives walking along the road, bewildered by the headlights, barely had time to leap out of the way. A bridge shot the car into open country, where the black, flat ground merged imperceptibly with the scarcely lighter sky. The moon was just rising, touching the countryside with haunting effulgence. In its light objects

flowed together. She could smell the paddy-fields; they seemed to ferment the wind into sour wine. A ghostly blur of light lay on the drenched stretches, suffused with the shadows of rice-shoots. The breathless speed stripped her mind of thought. It was what she wanted. To ride this way for hours—wind-cleansed—racing the stars!

Suddenly, with a scream of brakes, the car swerved. She gripped the side, finding herself abruptly at a standstill, with silence pressing against her ears. The quick cessation of motion left her bewildered. She was acutely conscious of the still darkness of the rice-fields, with nowhere a light.

"What is it?" she demanded.

"Somebody . . . " she heard the chauffeur articulate.

She stood up and leaned forward. The car had stopped diagonally across the road, its hood pointed toward a ditch. At one side lay what looked like a large white clot.

"What is it?" she repeated.

The chauffeur did not stir out of the seat. "Frenchman—maybe drunk—maybe dead."

The intense quiet, the body, the remoteness of the road, all ran together in her mind with a feeling of dread. She looked behind. In the distance a few lights—native huts. She had an instant of helplessness, then she ordered:

"Get out and see."

The Annamite slipped from the seat, and a moment later she saw him bend over the white clot. His short laugh sounded grotesque in that desolate spot.

"Drunk."

She felt relieved but still disturbed. After a pause she got out.

The man lay with his head in the grass at the side of the road. A shudder traveled over her at thought of him lying there where things could creep over him. The rest of him sprawled in the dust, one arm bent under him, the other flung out, palm down. His profile was blurred by the grass; soft hair caught the diluted radiance from the automobile's lights.

"He is not hurt?" she asked.

The chauffeur laughed again. "Smell," he said laconically.

But she had already caught a hint of alcohol. It disgusted her.

"Are you sure he is a Frenchman?"

For answer the chauffeur gripped the man under the arms and dragged him into the glare of the headlights, letting him fall with brutal carelessness.

It was a young face, white against the reddish dust. At first she thought some of that dust was sprinkled in his hair, then she saw that those glimmers were little russet auras in its wavy dark, created by the lights. At sight of this a memory shimmered and ran like quicksilver. The recollection nauseated her with its intensity. For an incredible instant Justin Batteur lay

there in the road, as if the earth had yielded his spirit in ironic jest. Although the resemblance was transitory, it sufficed to lend a certain familiarity to that white young face.

"He can't be left here," she said tentatively.

Then she noticed that his pockets had been turned inside out. Apprehensive, she bent and pressed her hand over his heart. His skin felt warm through the thin shirt. At her touch the tendons of his sunburned throat moved, and he uttered a low groan. The sound startled her.

"Lift his head," she directed the chauffeur. "See if he has been struck."

The callousness with which the Annamite raised the head and then let it drop made her angry.

"No," he reported tersely. It annoyed her that he did not add, "Madame."

The white face seemed to stare up at her pathetically. After a moment of indecision, she ordered the chauffeur to put him into the car. The Annamite stared. "Did you hear me?" she said sharply. "And be careful."

The native dragged the inert man to the side of the car and pushed him into the rear, head first. Another groan followed. Thi-Linh struck the Annamite across the head. "Did you not hear me say to be careful? Put him in the seat."

When the man lay in one corner, head thrown back against the lowered top, legs sprawled across the floor, she got in.

"Police station?" asked the chauffeur.

She did not reply but went through the man's pockets. In his coat she found several letters.

"Give me the electric torch."

By the flashlight she read the name and address on the envelopes. "Richard Garstin, White Funnel Steamship Line, Singapore, F.M.S." An Englishman or an American. The letters bore the postmarks of Manila and Hongkong. She shifted the light to the man.

His white suit was very soiled, and his black cravat twisted awry. The face, in spite of its pallor, was sunburned. There were little lines at the corners of the mouth and eyes; a hint of a frown traced on his forehead. His skin was granular and rough, as though coarsened by exposure. One wrist, hanging motionless against the edge of the seat, caught her attention. It had a mark over the thick veins. As she saw that it was an anchor delicately stenciled in blue, she understood.

There was a dry clot on one cheek, and smears of dirt—evidently he had fallen or was thrown upon his face. His mouth, in contrast to his general appearance of ruggedness, was thin and sensitive. There was nothing about him suggestive of Justin Batteur except that rusty sheen which tipped the waves of his dark hair.

"Police station?" the chauffeur repeated; and she thought she heard a malicious eagerness in his tone. It added to her irritation.

"No," she said coldly. "No—drive home."

After she spoke she was startled and a little frightened. Her first impulse was to countermand the order, but she saw how ridiculous that would make her. Something in the way he lay there, head fallen back, body inert, made it impossible for her to turn him over to the police. Of course she could leave him at a hotel, but that would be too conspicuous. The only thing she could do was to take him home or leave him here.

The chauffeur had started the motor, was backing around.

What will the servants think? she wondered. She knew they would carry no tales to Monsieur Chauvet, for even though they disliked her, all except Hoa, they were also afraid of her. But they would talk among themselves and others, and their imaginations would be unrestricted. Yet she could not wash her hands of this man simply to avoid gossip among the servants, no matter what circumstances had brought him to this isolated spot and in this condition.

Perhaps he would become conscious before they reached the city—that would relieve the situation—then she could take him to his ship or wherever he wished to go. If not, she would have to let the houseboy and the chauffeur put him in one of the guest-rooms for the night. After all, she could depend upon Hoa to mute the servants' talk.

Now and then the man stirred and made some faint sound. The moon rode high, and its light lay on his

face; his cravat flapped noisily. In the night, that face had a strange innocence, although she could smell the alcohol on his mouth.

Her mind was slashed with conjectures. . . . For some reason it depressed her to realize she would never know all she wanted to know about him, for if she had to take him home for the night, he would leave in the morning with only the perfunctory remarks that such a situation required. She had known few Englishmen and Americans, and it was a natural curiosity. Undoubtedly, she decided, he would be the traditional coarse and untutored seaman—in spite of the delicate hint of his lips.

She remembered that recent night at Cap St. Jacques when, standing on the beach, she had felt the nearness of ships on the black sea; perhaps his ship had been out there then. Curious. And she had seemed to surround those ships with the intensity of her desire, drawing all their terrific power of men and machinery into her own heart-beat.

The lights of Saïgon were multiplying ahead; flares from open doors slipped by, silhouettes of people, and odors of cooking.

The man lay there as though drugged. He had been so quiet the last few minutes that she felt for his pulse. With that touch the thought flashed into her that she would be glad if he did not wake up before they reached the house. Is that wrong? she wondered. But why should it be? It was simply—adventure; a brief

encounter without significance, except that, in spite of the sordid circumstances of his predicament, it had the illusive flavor of romance.

A momentary apprehension seized her as they drew near the house. It would be awkward . . . but it was too late to regret now. Nor did she regret, she told herself emphatically.

She glanced at the man anxiously as the car crunched loudly over the graveled driveway. He still lay in a stupor, although his breathing had become audible.

When the car drew up under the porte-cochère and the chauffeur opened the door, she jumped out, ordering him to wait. In the hallway she called for Hoa. After a moment the woman responded sleepily from upstairs.

"Come here."

Hoa came, with a dragging clack of sandals.

Thi-Linh told her there was a man, an Englishman or an American, out in the car, whom she had picked up unconscious on the Hoe-man Road, and she wanted her to call the house-boy and put him in the east bedroom. "I think he has been hurt," she added, despising herself for lying.

Hoa stared stupidly. "A man?" she repeated. An Englishman, or an American—in the east bedroom? A stranger? Her look became a warning. "But Monsieur Chauvet—"

"Don't ask questions," Thi-Linh interrupted; "do as I say."

She waited in the hall, her nerves tense. Presently

they came, Hoa holding open the door while the two Annamites entered carrying the unconscious man between them like a hammock. There was something pathetic in the way his limp hands dragged the floor. She wanted to tell them to lift him or those hands would be knocked and bruised, but she merely watched, fascinated, as they mounted the stairs, his wrists and fingers now and then thudding against the steps.

She followed, reaching the top as they disappeared in a doorway at the end of the hall. Hoa reappeared almost immediately with an accusing look.

"Hurt!" she sniffed.

Thi-Linh ignored her. "Get some water and wash his face," she directed.

Hoa smoldered. "Am I the servant of drunken Englishmen?"

"If you do not," Thi-Linh threatened, "then I shall."

Hoa went mumbling toward the bathroom. When the old woman returned, carrying basin and towel, she said:

"What will Monsieur Chauvet think?"

"He will think nothing," replied Thi-Linh, "if you make certain that he does not hear about it."

Hoa moved on without answering, still muttering to herself.

As Thi-Linh undressed she heard the muted music of leaves in the garden—branches whispering and brushing, broad-leaved fronds clashing shadowy cymbals. A phantom appassionata to which her thoughts moved.

. . . White face in the red dust of the road, red dust sprinkled on the crests of dark hair. And those hands swinging against the stairs. A sense of wistful and ineffable beauty permeated her. Adventurous encounter! Brief, fragile as lines of poetry. In the morning he would go. Always the picture of that white face in the road, from which time would exclude the memory of alcoholic smell and soiled clothing. No matter what he might say before he left (perhaps he could not even speak French!) his departure would come so quickly that any crudity would be easily dissolved in the aspect of adventure.

When she had put on a dressing-gown, she went into the hall. Hoa met her in the doorway of the east bedroom.

"He is still asleep?"

The old woman nodded sulkily.

For an instant Thi-Linh hovered on the threshold, gazing at the fog of mosquito-netting that made mystery of the form in the bed, then she returned to her room and lay listening to the breeze in the garden.

7

She sat in the cool blue shadow behind the blinds of the veranda waiting for him to come down.

A few minutes before, Hoa had made a reluctant but full report.

The house-boy, she said, had found him awake, star-

ing about the room quite bewildered. He tried to speak some language—perhaps it was English—and the house-boy had called her. When she went in, he spoke French—it was very bad French but it was French. He asked a thousand questions. "I told him," said Hoa, "he would have to ask madame; that *she* knew all about last night, and not *I!*" The boy had carried petit-déjeuner to him, and now he was shaving.

Thi-Linh instructed Hoa to take Monsieur Chauvet's old dressing-gown to him, and tell him she would be waiting on the veranda.

Beyond the blinds, a glittering silence submerged the garden; it was like a radiant pool into which the noises from the street fell and were dissolved.

She was wondering what she would say, her mind drowsily resisting the heat, when he came—so silently in his straw sandals that she was not aware of him until he appeared in the doorway. It was a little disconcerting, to see him standing there like that.

He looked compactly slender, but not thin, in the dressing-gown, and a bit fantastic with Monsieur Chauvet's ridiculously lilac pajamas bagging about his ankles. A blur of powder was on his newly shaven cheeks. As their eyes met, a deep red suffused his face.

"I am—" he began in French. Then he said something in English which she supposed was an inquiry as to whether or not she understood his native tongue.

She shook her head. "I do not speak English."

He hesitated. In the daylight he seemed very tawny with a sunburn which the dissipation of the night before had drained to a pale coffee-color. Immediately she was conscious of the dense brownness of his eyes—eyes that haunted with their very luxury of color.

"I—I speak French very badly," he commenced. It was a voice that made her think of thick dusk—something heavy and husky about it, a hint of inarticulateness in it. Perhaps that was because he did not know French very well. "I want to apologize," he said.

"Won't you sit down?"

When he moved there was an inconspicuous flexibility about his body that suggested lithe strength.

"It's all very—unfortunate," he began again; then, "May I smoke?"—gesturing toward the cigarettes on the table near by.

She noticed that his hand trembled as he struck the match and held it to the cigarette. Observing her eyes upon him, he laughed in an uncertain manner.

"You are English?" she asked.

"American."

He looked a little dissolute, she thought—the shadows under his eyes, the cut on his cheek where he had struck the ground—but that was because of last night. As she studied him, she had a recurrence of the feeling she had experienced briefly when looking at his dim face in the motorcar—a curious illusion of innocence. It was, she understood intuitively, an innocence

that could not be affected by experience. Men of his type went to sea, or entered into any adventure or reality, without formulated reason. They did not lack intelligence; it was simply that their thoughts moved with the languid cadence of their blood. Because they believed in emotion instead of analysis they remained untouched and guileless.

"You are from a ship?" she questioned.

He glanced guiltily at the tattoo on his wrist. "Infallible, isn't it?" His smile, stirring remotely in those densely brown eyes, seemed to diffuse without any objective and yet to regard something disturbingly imminent. "It's all very unfortunate," he repeated. "My ship—"

"Tell me what happened last night," she interrupted.

The lines in his forehead creased into a deliberate frown. In the following silence she imagined he was constructing French phrases. At last he said:

"I remember now—I saw you at the hotel—dancing with a French officer. I was there—sitting at a table on the sidewalk—with the mate. He had to get back to the ship early—some matters. I wandered around—pretty lonely, I guess. You know—or do you know?—what a sailor does when he's lonely? . . . What's the name of that other café—not the one where you were dancing—the Rotonde? From there I drifted to another—Café des Nations, I think. The last I remember was getting into a rickshaw and telling the coolie 'Waterside, steamship Nassau.' I guess I was awfully

drunk." After a pause he asked: "Where did you find me?"

Briefly she told him. That flush stole over his face again. Then, when the color had receded, he looked at her and she felt as if something actually physical had passed through her body.

"You were—very considerate," he said simply.

"It is nothing."

The glittering silence of the garden seemed to creep between them. He pressed his cigarette into a tray on the arm of his chair; waited as though expecting her to speak.

Finally she remarked:

"I suppose the other officers on the ship will be concerned about your absence." She designated him an officer because she was certain he was not a common seaman.

He smiled—that smile that regarded something disturbingly imminent.

"The Nassau was to sail some time after midnight —last night."

For some reason the words came to her with a shock. She managed to say calmly: "You mean—"

"I mean I got just what I deserved."

She offered him a cigarette and took one herself. His hand was a little steadier now.

He did not seem in the least concerned about having been left behind. The next moment she understood why.

"The Nassau is due in Hai-Phong in eight days," he announced; "she stops for cargo at—what's the name of the place, Quinhon?—and Tourane. I suppose I can make it up there by then."

"The railway does not go beyond Nhatrang," she said; "that is not a fourth of the distance."

He accepted the news with no evident emotion; but for a while he smoked in silence.

"Did you lose many valuables last night?" she inquired.

"I don't know how much I had when I got in the rickshaw—but not much."

"Do you remember the number of the rickshaw?"

He only laughed at that. "I do remember riding for a long while; and then I seemed to fall on my face." Again he looked at her. "I suppose—well, I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't—" He stopped, incoherent. More and more his voice made her think of thick dusks—an inarticulate groping.

He rose tentatively, obviously ill at ease.

"If you—you will tell the servant to bring my clothes," he began.

"I told Hoa to have your suit washed; but she will bring you one of Monsieur Chauvet's—I think it will fit. We have déjeuner at eleven-thirty."

His embarrassment grew. "I—I shan't trouble you any longer—as soon as my clothes are ready—I'll go and see the Consul—perhaps he—"

"You mean—you wish to go?"

The look in his eyes hurt her—he seemed so at a loss what to do or say.

He tried to laugh. "I don't want to, of course, but—"

"Suppose we talk of that at déjeuner?"

"You are very kind . . . mademoiselle?"

That glittering silence drew in until she could feel it trying to quench her breath.

"Madame—Madame Marie Linh," she said.

8

He appeared at déjeuner fresh in one of Monsieur Chauvet's suits. It fitted him a little loosely—but he was not the type to wear tight clothes. Instead of making him look slouchy, it gave an effect of careless relaxation to his supple firmness.

During the meal his manner was still constrained. This reticence, almost awkwardness at times, was due partly, she thought, to the fact that he could not fathom her. He did not understand her position in the house—of course he knew she was the mistress—nor what she was. To relieve the situation she announced casually that her husband was in Tonking at present—in Hanoi. He, Monsieur Chauvet, she added, was a director in the Banque de l'Indo-Chine.

She watched him closely, but his face reflected nothing. Yet when he addressed her, a moment later, he called her "Madame Chauvet." It made her uncom-

fortably conscious of herself; had he done it deliberately or did he fail to understand?

After luncheon he announced that he was going to the consulate. She suggested that one did not go out in the terrific midday heat in Saïgon, but when he showed no sign of changing his intention, she did not add that undoubtedly he would find the Consul resting; there was a hint of stubbornness about him that did not invite persuasion. It was not a defiant quality, but a simple resoluteness that came inevitably with any decision. Before he left she said that in the cool of the afternoon they would motor to Bien-Hoa.

As she lay in the artificial dusk of her room, trying to rest, the persistent image of his limp hands thudding against the staircase swung in her thoughts. In spite of that air of resolution, there was something helpless about him. Now that he had not left that morning, as she had expected, she resented his presence, for it had the power to make her restless. "I am through with all that," she had said to Monsieur Chauvet. I am, she repeated to herself. She wanted him to go, knew that he should, yet, perversely, she sought, in her thoughts, and even in her actions, to delay him. He had, she admitted, a decidedly distracting quality. A few years before, that complication in his character would have challenged her. It challenged now, but she had sufficient emotional poise to regard it from a distance.

She was, indeed, "through with all that."

When she went below she found him sitting in the frail gloom of the living-room, the air about him thick with smoke. He wore his own suit now, stiff with starch and too tight—he looked uncomfortable. He had been to the consulate twice, he said; the first time the Consul was resting.

"He told me a way I could get to Hai-Phong." He took a sheet of note-paper from his pocket and read: "Train to Nhatrang, bus to Tourane; then train to Dong-ha, and bus again to Vinh; after that, rail all the way to Hai-Phong, via Hanoi." As he spoke he looked very depressed. "He said it could be made in about five days."

"When will you go?"

"In the morning." Then he added hastily: "But tonight—I—I can stay at a hotel."

"That is unnecessary," she said simply.

Now the motorcar was purring toward Bien-Hoa, over a road that plunged through groves of areca-palms relieved by stretches of rice-fields where peasants stood thigh-deep in succulent green. As it was late, he wore no hat, and she found his dark, sunburnt hair very disturbing. He talked little. But the quiet was eased by an emotional content they both shared and which, in him, was slowly absorbing the faint depression that had settled on him at the house. She was aware, suddenly, that he had a protective strength reminiscent of Justin—yet the fact that he abandoned himself to impulses, a fact she sensed, made that solidity physical

rather than a mental attitude. Affection, in men like him, was permanent without changing their habits.

The sun had almost set when they reached Bien-Hoa. The yellow, moldy houses had an air of soft anguish in the ruddy afterlight, and the river took on the dignity of dusk. They stopped at a little café facing the stream. The association of ancient, drowsy decadence clung about its mildewed walls.

They took a table on the sidewalk, facing the glimmering air of the west.

Out on the stream, the shadows of clouds drifted in a lazy herd; the sound of a bugle, ringing tremulously from the barracks, momentarily turned the air to silver.

"It—it's beautiful here, isn't it?" he said as though surprised at the discovery.

For an instant a sleeping sense of beauty was aroused in his eyes, bringing a quick flush to her emotions. All his incoherent, inarticulate being had seemed to draw a swift breath. Her sensitiveness to his feeling startled her.

"I—I like this hour," he said. "At this time I—I imagine all sorts of things—and sometimes"—he laughed nervously—"I repeat idiotic words aloud—words that seem like they've been—well, dipped in color—" He stopped abruptly, as though he had betrayed something.

"You haven't finished—you were going to say—"

"I was going to say, you should be in the bow of a

ship at this time of day—it—it's magnificent. Sometimes there are birds flying around the cargo-booms—gulls. I—love gulls."

There was a swooping suggestion in his words—they dipped into her blood and started it roving. She had seen gulls at Cap St. Jacques; they always made her think of pain.

"Have you ever heard a gull cry?" he asked.

She thought she heard a gull cry then—shuddery and dark. For a moment the wistful luxury of feeling in his eyes seemed to become articulate in a desperate sound.

"I remember . . ." He stopped, painfully embarrassed.

"Won't you tell me?"

The gathering dusk was a soft cocoon weaving them closer together. He had clasped his hands on the table, and in his nervousness, he pressed his fingers together so tightly that they darkened under the nails and the tattoo over his thick veins moved like a shadow. He smiled to cover his awkwardness.

"It's something—one shouldn't tell a woman. I forgot for a minute."

"It was something about—gulls—and dusk?" she urged.

"Really . . ."

"Really I should like to hear it. What is it that makes you afraid, the traditional Anglo-Saxon restraint?"

His laugh was uncertain. "It's rather—sordid." As he spoke he looked at her with that curious innocence in his brown irises.

She regarded him quizzically. "You don't really think that."

He smiled—that expression that sought after something remote. "No," he said at length. "No, I don't. . . . It happened in a little town where I lived for a while. I was quite young—about seventeen—I hadn't gone to sea then. There are lots of cliffs along the beach there—fine and gray—sort of tumbling up out of the sand."

He paused, and she had the feeling that his appreciation of beauty was seeking frantically to make itself audible. It would have been easier in his own tongue. Yet the fact that he had to struggle to find the words, gave a deeper intensity to what he said, as though all his senses had become attenuated.

"I used to go there late afternoons—the air was full of gulls. One afternoon I stayed there until dark—all the gulls were gone except one that kept circling over the water and crying. I didn't see the girl on the beach until I'd climbed down—I can't remember at all what she looked like, except that she was pale and—and something about her white look was like the crying of that gull. . . . I didn't want her—it seemed as if I were trying to find something that was in the cry of that bird. . . . Afterward, I was disgusted, I—" He stopped, the knuckles of his tightly clasped hands

white. There was something taut and pinched in his face, too. He tried to laugh. "You see how—how sordid it was—that story? I told you . . ." The fierce emotion behind that face struck her with blanching force.

He was trying desperately to tell her a thing that had troubled him for years. She could see that young boy on the cliff—the gull planing over the sea. His hair was darker then, without those little ripples of sunburn; his eyes less intense but more authentically innocent. There had been other experiences in the following years at sea, but never under cliffs, with a bird crying in the dusk. Mere physical gestures—behind them an almost savage bewilderment.

Bien-Hoa—the river, the trees, and the ancient decadence of the café—all lay sensually quiet under the powder of early evening. She felt it with a sensation as of suspended breathing.

"I think I understand," she managed to say.

How grotesquely inadequate! But how could she tell him that so often in the twilight region of her mind she had heard the dark music of gulls?

The hush drew about them; she was aware that his poise had raveled, and she could think only of conventional things to say. She began to talk. Empty words poured forth inconsequentials. He seemed grateful, responding almost eagerly with banalities. She wanted to hurry away, to return quickly to the familiar atmosphere of Saïgon.

When they left, soiled lamps had been lighted in the café, and a black silence flowed with the river.

That ride back to town was painful. She was no longer conscious of an emotional ease—their silences were strained, nerve-racking. Her thoughts blurred and raced by like the palms beside the road, seeming to become audible in the whirring of the motor.

Some of her assurance returned when the car drew up at the house. In the hallway he paused uncomfortably.

"I think," he said, "I had better go now."

She did not know whether she was relieved or not; her surprise was carefully concealed behind a cool tone when she spoke.

"But the train does not leave until tomorrow."

"It leaves early in the morning—and I don't want to disturb you."

She knew he was lying, but she knew also that he was determined to go, if not immediately, before the evening was over.

"Surely you will stay until after dinner?"

He hesitated, then murmured, "Thank you."

She was sorry she had asked him to remain; through the meal her nerves danced with each clash of glass and silverware. His self-consciousness was visible in a positive agony that darkened his eyes. Afterward, over liqueur and coffee in the living-room, he stepped close to her to take a cigarette, and an enervating warmth almost made her sway nearer. Thereafter when she

spoke, the silence following her words seemed to jangle about her like broken glass.

Finally he said he must go.

With that announcement the tension relaxed a little—but it left her vaguely frightened. He had no hat, and she offered him one of Monsieur Chauvet's old ones, but he refused it with quiet decision. His effort to put his gratitude into words was pathetic. How many hundred years had passed, she thought, since she had found him lying in the red dust? His hand was moist and heavy as he told her good-by; he stood on the top step, and over his shoulder she could see the dart and glide of two rickshaws beyond the low iron fence. She said something else—afterward she could not remember what it was—then he had descended the steps, heavily, quickly, and had become a silhouette receding in the graveled driveway.

Inert hands, brown and thick-veined, thumping against the stairs. When she went into the house she could imagine them swinging there, limply, as they had done the night before.

Her thoughts were weaving painfully through a dark texture. He had gone. Adventurous encounter! Brief, fragile. . . . More like the white flare of gunpowder. . . . Love him? No, it was not love—not as she understood love. . . . Something else—something strange. . . . Gone. And there was no way she could have prevented it without making herself absurd. None. Unless—— She endured a sensation that was

an ecstasy of regret. Why had not she thought of it before? She could have taken him in the car—to Vinh—six days, maybe seven, for the entire trip. Monsieur Chauvet would never have known—or she might have gone on to Hanoi—surprised Monsieur Chauvet. Outwardly he would have been annoyed, inwardly pleased. And then she could have stolen those few days out of life—not to touch him—only to ride beside him—see that luxury of brown in his eyes—the little ripples of rust in his hair—a gull swooping over the sea—a boy seeking the mystery of pain in its cry—herself seeking the pain and joy the man expressed.

But how fantastic. Impossible. She was glad she had not thought of it. Through with all that. Respectability—the paradoxical respectability of being Monsieur Chauvet's mistress.

Limp hands thudding against the steps—following her upstairs.

She undressed and tried to read. Insects blundered about the light, cicatrizing the quiet. They seemed to enter the printing and buzz before her eyes. She closed the book and turned out the light.

Sleep! To imagine she could sleep! Smells from the garden stole up and haunted the darkness; a wan diffusion of moonlight made fluid rectangles of the windows.

Rising, she thrust her feet into bedroom sandals, slipped on a peignoir and went downstairs.

The boy had not put out the lights in the living-

room. Taking a cigarette from the table, she lighted it and moved out on the veranda.

She sat down; it was the chair he had occupied that morning.

The shrubbery in the deep yard made formless contours on either side of the driveway; fence and gate were starkly silhouetted against the lighted street. Even the street was deserted. Gradually she made out a pale figure against one of the gate-posts—the house-boy. That was the only bit of life in the dreadfully inert night. Even that was motionless.

What is he doing there? she wondered. Waiting for some girl, perhaps. The thought annoyed her. A tryst at the gate. She would stop that.

"Nham!" she called. "Nham!"

The figure started away from the post; she caught the flash of a white suit. Something in that movement brought her to her feet, her heart-beat trebling.

"Wait!" she cried involuntarily.

The figure was hurrying along outside the fence. She rushed down into the yard, lost a sandal but went on. When she reached the gate the man had paused a few yards away, a white shadow under the trees. Slowly he turned, walked back toward her, reluctance in his stride.

"I—I shouldn't have come," he began, his voice thick with embarrassment. "I was restless, so I walked, and suddenly I found myself here—and I—I just stood by the gate—for a moment—"

"I should not have let you go," she said, composing herself. "I am sure you have no money—nor do you know where to get any."

There was a long silence. Her blood seemed to thicken and stand still. She wondered if, in the darkness, his eyes were filled with that liquid intensity. Finally he articulated:

"No, it's true—I can't make it to—to my ship. I'll have to wait here until something comes up. The Consul said—"

"But you have no place to stay," she interposed. He had gone, without money, without anything, rather than accept charity. The realization stirred an overwhelming pity.

"You—you had done so much—already."

He was going—going. How could she keep him? That quiet stubbornness, that stubbornness without defiance; what weapon was adequate to penetrate it?

"But you must come in," she commenced. "The same room——" She caught her breath; something winged and perilous had risen out of her despair. Its quick rush made her dizzy. But when she spoke her voice sounded calm.

"My husband—Monsieur Chauvet—telegraphed for me to join him in Hanoi—I am leaving in the morning at sunrise—in my car." She laughed—a cool, decisive laugh. "After all, you see, you can make your ship. . . . No, you must not protest—my"—again she

laughed—"my reputation can sustain the shock of traveling up the coast of Annam—alone with a man."

9

In a few hours they would reach Hué.

Richard Garstin sat in silence beside her, his gaze on the passing countryside. Now and then, when their glances met, he looked a little dazed and smiled faintly; he did not attempt to talk. He wore one of Monsieur Chauvet's helmets, and, in the face of the wind, the strap was lowered and molded tightly in the crease under his lower lip. That brown strap gave him the appearance of heightened virility. It also seemed, curiously, to offer an excuse for his silence.

The chauffeur slouched in the front seat, plunging the car ruthlessly ahead with deliberate menace to the natives or animals in the road.

Her thoughts slipped back to that night at Saïgon—to the hours between. Now that they had been on the way for almost three days, the incredible folly of the thing had lost its fantastic aspect. Nor was she frightened any more. The vital present excluded the future, even the past, temporarily. There was little danger; few men that she knew traveled along this coast; and at Vinh she would leave him, returning to Saïgon and —she had to admit it—a life that was a sterile gesture. This indiscretion—Monsieur Chauvet would never know of it. And it was not wrong—simply to

ride beside him, to talk with him, to watch the velour softness of his eyes. On the surface he was simple, simple as the soil, an ordinary man who lived instead of analyzed—yet deep within was a delicate complexity of character that had disclosed its presence that afternoon at Bien-Hoa.

Although he had lived—never extravagantly, she realized, but to his own satisfaction—there was something withdrawn about him. It suggested an unconscious reserve that guarded a spiritual purity more essential than physical chastity. This ability to withdraw was a quality they had in common. She, too, had lived—yet there were no flaws in her conscience; a few regrets, perhaps, and immeasurable pity. She could not believe that she had done any great wrong. Her life had been the antithesis of convention, but, after all, morality was tradition. In the beginning—before human beings became so complex—there were no laws regulating emotions; laws were necessary when men came to recognize their own instability. Humanity had been forced legally to confess its weakness. How tragic that proud blood and body should become so humble!

It was impossible now, as a result of ages of increasing sophistication, to realize any desire not entirely conventional without bringing ingenuity and deceit into play. Simple as this journey was, it involved a certain amount of subterfuge and intrigue which Thi-Linh detested. It had been necessary to leave several letters

with Hoa, one to be mailed to Monsieur Chauvet every other day. She had also given Hoa instructions to telegraph her along the way if she had any news of importance.

Poor Hoa! Thi-Linh would never forget her expression when she announced her intention of taking Richard Garstin up the coast to Vinh. At first, she had been too surprised to say anything, and when she fully grasped what Thi-Linh planned to do, the enormity of the indiscretion smote her dumb. Her silent, accusing gaze followed every movement of preparation; and it was the last thing Thi-Linh saw as the car glided away from the house.

Perhaps that look was responsible for the strange thudding emotion that struck her after they had passed Bien-Hoa. The sun had been up an hour, and the golden mist of early morning was just clearing. It seemed to evaporate from her own mind, and the tangible nearness of the man, coupled with the reason for his presence, was a distinct shock. She was terrified for a moment. Daylight was a cruel fluid that brought out the secret and invisible writing of nocturnal impulses; and she perceived actually, for the first time, what she was doing.

But with the passing of a few hours, that fear dissolved. She felt contented—contented as she had not been for years. But he was a difficult companion in spite of the sense of physical and mental warmth that he gave her. He seemed still bewildered by this sud-

den development. His words were few, and without significance.

The first night they stopped at Phanrang, a little town on the coast. Behind it were the blue mountains that rose to Dalat. After dinner in the tiny hotel, she suggested a walk.

Sea-wind and star-swoon; the moon still loitering below the sky-line. All the bewilderment seemed to lift from his brain. He laughed—hesitantly, for that was his manner—and hummed little songs as they wandered through the streets. Once he quoted poetry in English—he could not translate all of it, he said, but it was by a young Englishman who died in the war. It was called "The Great Lover."

"'Wet roofs,'" he murmured; "'live hair that is shining and free . . . the comfortable smell of friendly fingers. . . .'" After a pause, given courage by the darkness, he blurted out awkwardly: "It's funny—but I love little things, too . . . white roads—and ships'-ropes—the smells of resin and canvas—the feel of water and sand—hair in the wind—the look in some people's eyes. . . . And of course," he added, "gulls. . . ."

To her his words were like the beat of wings—a flutter of something beautiful and wild, half-seen in the blurred core of his crystal simplicity. Her thoughts swung back to that evening at Bien-Hoa; a baffling insecurity filled her.

The next morning they started early. The superb

shoulders of that mountainous coast were bathed in an orient drench of sunlight. This setting imparted a singular beauty to the coolies passing in the road. These common people walking with bare feet seemed to possess an enviable intimacy with the mountains. Assignation of skin and soil. Life surging into them from the green veins of the earth, from the coral veins of the sea; chamelion blood that linked them into a rhythmic whole.

Annam—her mother's country. The sudden realization of her inheritance seemed, in some mysterious way, to allow her to share this intimacy. Was there, she wondered, anything so beautiful in France? She felt a quick pride in Annam. She had never discussed her blood with Richard Garstin—undoubtedly he knew she was a half-caste—but suddenly she said:

"This is my mother's country."

There was nothing apologetic in her tone. He responded with a curious little smile that seemed to say: "And did you think I didn't know your heritage was as ancient and authentic as these mountains?"

It was the first direct compliment he had given her, even with his eyes, and it was reassuring. Prejudice had been dissolved in the warm tolerance that experience had given him. It would have been almost tragic to find him like . . . like the others. She was happy, for she felt that she could have told him about Kim Khouan, Justin, Paul, all, and he would have understood. Nevertheless, she had no idea of doing it. No

matter what he sensed, the truth in words would destroy a certain chivalry that existed between them.

At sunset they reached Quinhon where they dined. The town was a huddle of pale houses riveted together with lights, and pigmy-small under the somber mass of the rocky coast; a coast that here thrust a tongue of sand into the sea.

"It makes me think of the place where I used to live—the mountains and the beach," he said. "Shall we walk by the shore? I used to, there. . . ."

The white sand underfoot was like a strip of accumulated dust from the stars that swarmed over the mountains and down into the bay. Far out in the harbor, an off-shore breeze slipped its hands into the charging manes that rode against the promontory. The surf was visible to her in pale scars that writhed and vanished.

His presence—a white form swinging along easily and in silence—seemed to rinse her thoughts in aromatic coolness. Although he had become an indistinct shape, she was aware of his suavely muscular body. And the breeze twisted strands of his hair into a dark blur between his eyes—the hair that always disturbed her.

How full he made the darkness seem! The realization was vaguely alarming. How would she react when he was gone? Would the days quickly fill in the rift he had made, like sand in the wake of a wheel? Or would his passage leave an indelible mark, a bruise

to bathe and swathe for many months? "Through with all that." Yes, she had said this. But how stupid!—how stupid to say one was through with anything until death!

Death. That word, with all its implications, slipping into her mind so vibrantly alive, seemed utterly incongruous. Yet it brought a significant aversion that was not fear but distaste. Beautiful flesh woven through with a tapestry of worms, and soil softening the decay, cleansing the bones, until sockets and skull became the acceptable refuge of seeds; hungry seeds that drained the last marrow from the bones and uncurled to the sunlight in incredible colors; each to emulate the sacrifice of flesh that had given it life, perpetuating a cruel and bitter principle of succession. How dreadful, to lose all this consciousness of living! Suddenly even pain seemed precious. And yet, she reflected, there was sardonic beauty, even satisfaction, in the law of rot and bloom. In some other night, far removed, would she spring from earth, with singing in her veins, and open an extravagant flower to the morning? Or would all the golden sap of her flourish again in limbs that stretched with ecstatic rigidity to the sun, expressing in fiber and tendril the awareness of living that filled her now?

"Oh, live swiftly, swiftly!" the night whispered.

Ah, yes! Live! What did tradition matter? Or creed? Or laws? On one side of the earth, men cried out their fears to gods of wood and stone; on the other,

just as many prayed to a deity without figure or image. In another hundred years or so these gods would be cast aside for new ones. And what would be accomplished? Only a little more knowledge, contradictory and ironic, to be distributed among the wise. But no greater security, no deeper convictions.

What had religion given her? Certainly no conception of life; what she knew of life she had learned from living. It had only filled her youth with superstitious fears and her maturity with doubt.

For a moment she was startled by the realization of her utter escape from dogma.

Had nothing of the faith of her Ancestors survived in her? As she looked at that faith now, dispassionately, it seemed a lifeless cult built on the vainglory of past generations. Worms were crawling in the rotten wood of the pagodas; mold on the tablets; bats, careening among the spiders' webs woven between the carved and lacquered beams, powdered the altars with dung.

And the faith that France had brought? What deposit had it left on her? Pontifical words. The incense lifting in the churches was the smoke of burning years; and with the ashes the faithful were baptized, while chant and song drowned their whimperings of fear. The cross was not the symbol of hope but of the final ecstasy of pain before death.

And God—what was God? The agonized cry of the body facing the fecundity and decay of nature? A

chorus in which she, too, sang frenziedly? But her voice, suddenly, had grown weak.

In the heart of Cambodia were the remnants of a religion. . . . She had heard whispers at Stung-Treng, when she was a child. . . . In those stone altars was there a simple truth which men, burdened with years of servitude to a false ideal of intellect, called obscene?

But what did it matter? Nothing mattered at that moment except that she had grown weary of complicated conjectures. The man walking in silence beside her seemed the key to a dimension of simplicity that promised rest. Abruptly she said:

"Tell me about your country; what is it like?"

He laughed. "That's queer. I was thinking about it then. . . . America." He mused over the word. "America is sort of—well, you may smile, but—but sometimes I think of America as a blond giant—why blond, I don't know—but a blond giant—lying in the sun—and wearing a mask—a stupid, grinning mask—with a fine face underneath. I—I suppose that's absurd, but . . ." The sentence ended in silence.

It was one of those moments when, having surprised his reticence, she was rewarded with an expression of that sensitiveness hidden at the center of his nature.

"Go on," she said.

"America. . . ."

He talked of the marvel of tall buildings. But she

saw a mammoth body—a giant taking life from the bosom of ripe hills. His chest was hairy with fields of grain; steel and iron were his muscles; mills ground in his brain, whirling strange laughter; and in that magnificent torso the spurt and scream of industry jetted rich blood into arteries eager for life. Nude body stretching in the sun, its mask turned toward Europe and its feet thrust Eastward.

She had seen pictures of men working in iron-foundries in America. In the heat and activity of such surroundings he had been produced.

She understood a little now: foundries pulsing in his veins, the chant of mills—and a savage wistfulness in his heart.

Yet, although he was significant of his nation, she could not associate him entirely with one country. Perhaps, she reflected, that was proof of his being American. There was a stamp upon all the Frenchmen she knew. It was Europe—Europe, a vain and tired woman, burdened with vices and art, but imperious, cruel; not cruel as Asia was cruel, with an inherited and refined barbarity, but with the attenuated maliciousness of a pampered woman.

Suddenly any contact with France—which, to her, was Europe—seemed fatal. It was corrupting Indo-China. In her own experience she had seen abundant evidence of it. Her mother, Nanette, Kim Khouan—yes, herself; and thousands of others unknown to her but of which these instances were symbolical.

As she reflected upon herself and her country she was aware of a new element in the dark water that expired quietly upon the beach. Currents flowing in it touched America, his country. How splendid it would be, to plunge into that sea and swim, on and on, to the shores of that new continent, washing herself clean of Indo-China, of all its implications and entanglements!

"I should like to go to America," she found herself saying.

A moment of silence before he said, "Would you?" Something abrupt, startled in his voice. "But you—you belong here."

"You mean—on this beach—tonight?"

He laughed uneasily. "No, I mean in Indo-China. In another setting; in America, for instance, you would be—well, different."

His words seemed the crystallization of what she knew already; they had the curious effect of weaving her, in her thoughts, more inextricably into the country. It was depressing. In a way she felt as though he had pronounced judgment.

"Why, I wonder?" she asked aloud.

"You are Indo-China," he said simply.

"As definite as that? But you—you are America—yet you seem to fit into this setting."

He laughed again, diffidently; the reference to himself seemed to make him a little shy.

"I'm—fluid, I guess. Sea-spawned, they call it. I

like the sea—going to new places—not knowing what will happen—drifting everywhere. I'll never amount to anything—but I'll enjoy living."

He seemed to pass sentence upon himself, too. Fluid. Running into strange corners of the world, leaving no track—like quicksilver. There were men of that type. Something withdrawn inside them. How widely separated the two of them were! Her depression grew, intensified by the continued silence to which he succumbed.

That night, after she had gone to bed, she tried to picture the circumstances from which he had emerged, those forces, so foreign to her, that made him what he was. She could see him as a little boy in some town where mills ground the days into monotony. Close by was the sea; canvas beating against his fancy. He would have gone to school, for he had an air of quiet education. Then he would have left school to go to sea. Years of sailing, of valiant living—and little niches into which he crawled, reading poetry and dreaming shyly.

As she lay there thinking of him, he seemed to contract to a white gull, crying far off across a limitless sea. Even when she fell asleep that wistful note echoed through her slumber.

The next night they stopped at Tourane. As usual, they walked after dinner, but he talked very little; he was heavy, moody. Once, when her hand brushed his, he jumped and she knew his face grew swarthy with

blood in the darkness. That brief contact suffused her senses with a blurred radiance.

"Tomorrow," she said hopefully, when they returned to the hotel and he had told her good night, "we shall pass through Hué, the old capital. Suppose we spend the day there? We have time, and . . ."

"You think it won't make us late? I must get the ship." Doesn't he want to prolong the journey? she wondered. Then, before she could reply, he added: "But of course you know how much time we have—and I—I'd like to see the old capital."

They started at dawn. A road, climbing the mountains to the beginning of that mighty gorge called the Pass of the Clouds, carried them to an immaculate height where, looking back, they could see the Bay of Tourane lying like a tiny pool surrounded by toy hills.

The motor seemed to sing over that high road. Turning sharp curves and purring along the edges of dizzy precipices, it plunged higher into the sky, until the herds of lazy clouds seemed to fly before it. Now and then the crystal shattering of a brook drenched the stones on the side where the mountain continued its ascent; or, on the other, the wall of rock and foliage suddenly dropped, to reveal, far below, the shock and glitter of sunlight on water. Where the white beach merged with the mountainsides the sea flung up silent clouds of surf.

Thi-Linh's veins seemed to run with the cool wind. This, she knew, was an ancient highway—the old

Mandarin Road. Dreams slept under the macadam. Emperors had traveled here, with swinging cortèges of hot orange and staring purple; and armies had marched through this pass—the chased-silver blades of Annam, and the blue-bright bayonets of France. In the past, palanquins; now, motors. Very soon, fleets in the air; and the grind and roar of a great railway that the French planned, linking Saïgon with Hanoi. And yet would all this vitally change Annam? Only in certain physical and political details. Still the peasants would work the soil with buffaloes yoked to wooden plows; would sow and harvest the rice-fields, half-naked and thigh-deep in the ooze. That peasant, she realized, was the symbol of a changeless Annam; a spirit that moved on impervious to the alterations in style and government.

She felt a growing pride in her mother's country, in *her* country. Was it not part of Indo-China, and did not she belong, inextricably? Even the man beside her had realized that.

As he sat there, one brown hand gripping the side of the car, face thrust forward eagerly, he made personal the epic vitality of those mountains. Fluid. That was it. Flowing quietly into every corner where circumstance took him—molding without losing his individuality—then moving on, leaving no track—like quicksilver. But when he slipped out of her sphere he would leave a track.

In a few hours now they would reach Hué.

The mountains had dwindled into flat green country that seemed to swim in heat. The villages that whirled by were blurred by vertical rays; a wind, hot and dusty, rushed against the car. The man wore a dazed, tired expression, as though forced suddenly to contemplate the strange circumstances that had brought him there; an exertion that, in the heat, was exhausting. Once their eyes met and he smiled fugitively.

"A week ago," he murmured, "I never thought . . ." The words yielded to a burning swirl of wind. He removed his helmet and mopped his forehead. Sweat moistened his brown face.

"And in another week . . ." she breathed.

"God, but it's hot!" he muttered.

10

The hotel at Hué faced the river; the River of Perfumes, the natives called it.

From the windows of her room Thi-Linh could see the stream and the drowsy green of the old town and Citadel on the opposite bank, reached by a modern French bridge. Immediately, and for no apparent reason, that bridge seemed to link her with something imminent and significant.

After the noon heat had passed, they took rickshaws for a ride about the city.

Garstin still looked tired. The dense brown of his eyes had thickened to a sluggish dark; his back was

streaked with sweat, and there was a soiled rim about his shirt collar. All his vitality seemed to sag in a body temporarily flaccid; he was pathetic, an astonishing caricature of himself. She could not understand the change. Nor did his diffuse glances betray even a hint. He seemed, she thought, to cower before her.

When they rattled across the bridge and into the native town, the restful, almost foreign atmosphere aroused him a little; once or twice he spoke, calling her attention to some figure or object.

The irregular roof-lines topping the narrow streets slanted down to awnings above doorways thick with gloom and smells, and between these shops moved men and women in oiled silk garments and folded black turbans, the mingled clattering of their sandals sounding a sharp obbligato to the cadenced thud of bare feet as coolies raced by, drawing rickshaws. The blanched face of France was not in evidence here, and only infrequently did the ivory skin of mixed blood show itself in that tawny motley. Annam undiluted, Thi-Linh thought; whispering in the sleazy black tunics, in the little dragons of light and shadow that wove stealthily in tissue robes.

On the canals, sampans with patched sails drowsed in a midst of warm, offensive odors or moved lazily impelled by flexing women who sang as they poled. Nipa-palms inclined on the banks, staring at their tremulous likenesses.

Beyond the shops, across fragile bridges, was a

quarter where the hot air was filled with the sweetness of lime-trees and other fragrant growths. Within the houses, seen through open doors and windows, were embroidered silk panels whose gilt characters quoted the precepts of ancient sages. In little courts and gardens, hidden by walls, old men with a straggly floss of beard on their chins sat and read yellowed scripts, while in the scum-green bowls of fountains fish with transparent red and azure fins turned the water into rainbows.

Thi-Linh thought Hué was like an immense garden; a hothouse of scented green that blurred together under the glazed panes of sunlight. Little bungalows peered out from hedges; the walls of pagodas; the aged battlements of the Citadel with its Chinese-looking gates; the tongue-like eaves of the Palace and its throbbing pink wall; darts of color appearing and reappearing in the inundation of foliage.

"Chinese," said Richard Garstin, with a gesture that took in the entire city. "It reminds me of some of the towns in the interior of Szechuan and Yunnan."

Thi-Linh herself had observed the peculiarly Chinese character of the place. It was like pictures she had seen in books about China. The roofs of the pagodas, the gongs hanging in red lacquer frames, the walls, the gates—all were Chinese. That was not so in Cambodia, or even in Cochin-China. Chinese influence was there of a certainty, and very strong, but it was not so forcibly apparent.

She found this a little disturbing. Here in a green pocket of Annam where the old blood still pulsed sluggishly the physical aspect was Chinese. It was only the exterior, she knew, for the heart was Annamite. But it suggested a peculiar analogy with Saïgon, that city so obviously French in its pretensions yet native in its impulses. More than two thousand years had passed since the first Chinese invasion of Annam—and still Hué reflected those conquerors.

The past, a past in which the influences that had produced her were woven very definitely, was colored with Chinese influence. Off and on, since the earliest times, Annam had been the vassal of China, and slowly the architecture, the dress, the manners and the learning of that empire had filtered in; with the result that at the end of China's suzerainty Annam, physically, was a replica of it. Even some of its blood was Chinese. But the soul? Thi-Linh had the feeling that it had remained Annamite. Yet how could a country change on the exterior and retain its native spirit?

Suddenly it seemed to her that Annam possessed a great secret—the power to assimilate, even simulate, without losing its national individuality.

Now, since France had come, the landscape was rapidly metamorphosing again. The fleur-de-lis had taken root deep in the soil—yet it had a curiously exotic and Asian appearance. It resembled the lotus-flower of Annam.

She remembered the significance of the Rugby game she had seen in Saïgon.

Here in Hué it had another significance. The French had come with bayonets stinging in the equatorial sunlight, with the roll of sharp-tongued drums, sowing the legend of Civilization in soil too fecund to resist any new growth. Civilization became an orchid, springing up lush and brutal from the morass of colonization. It smelled savagely of Asia. Motorcars, railways, mills, factories, all took on the aspect of the country, flourishing quickly—and suggesting that just as quickly they would rot.

It was a few miles from Hué, she remembered, that a French admiral had swung in his gunboats, landed his marines to the red hysteria of "La Marseillaise," and made the waters of the lagoon stagnant with the blood of peasant soldiery, afterward marching on the city and forcing a protectorate upon Annam. With the signing of that treaty, China, politically, expired upon the polished tiles of the Palace. The sign of the bayonet swiftly changed to the sign of the piastre; the orchid spread its roots and exhaled a treacherous sweetness upon the air. The fleur-de-lis had spawned a harlot.

Now, behind the walls of the Palace, an Emperor was dying, an Emperor who, like his predecessors under the French régime, had been merely a gesture. Around him still was the splendor of a Chinese court—mandarins, concubines, and eunuchs. To be sure, white French uniforms gleamed sharply in the midst of these

brocaded robes. But, esthetically, China dominated. It colored even the names of the quarters of the Palace: the Imperial Purple Gate, the Court of Supreme Peace. . . . In France, the heir to the throne was being educated: a little boy with smooth yellow skin, narrow eyes, and a tongue that suavely recited French. . . . When the present Emperor died, would the lingering shadow of China pass, dissipated in this new phase? The fountains of Versailles where once lotus-pools had been; trains crashing through the silence of Hué; mills wounding the quiet above the graves of powdered emperors? . . .

Perhaps. But for some reason Thi-Linh could not be alarmed by the possibility. Hué seemed to assure her. France, it whispered, was not destroying Annam; it was destroying the face of old Annam and giving it, very scientifically and neatly, a new one. And she, Thi-Linh, daughter of Thi-Bao and a Frenchman, belonged to the period of transition when France was working with plastic surgery upon a corner of Asia.

It was late afternoon when they reached the tomb of Tu-duc, one of the ancient rulers.

In the dusk, the pools scattered through the gardens were tarnished with silver lily-pads, over which pink clouds of lotus-flowers drifted low. The air was nostalgic with the scent of frangipani.

Thi-Linh, pausing below the terraces, thought she had never seen a place so still and lovely.

Stone mandarins stood guard in the court, and be-

yond them the sheen of red and gold lacquer, of tiled roofs with grotesque finials, all subdued by the lilac half-light, seemed to breathe a fantastic dream through the thickening air.

The buildings were three: an enclosure for the mortal remains, a pavilion for the memory, and a temple for the soul.

A look of drowsy wonder blurred the pupils of Richard Garstin's eyes. He carried his helmet in his hand, as though humbled by the melancholy loveliness. In the swiftly descending dusk his suit was spotlessly white. It shed an actual radiance. Was he real, she wondered.

Involuntarily she touched him. His skin was warm, moist. A quiver of muscles ran across his cheek; his eyes swerved to her, dense and luminous. As she withdrew her hand, startled, she realized she had touched his wrist—that strong wrist with the heavy veins. The tattooed anchor seemed to have needled its pattern in fire upon her finger-tips.

He had stopped, rigid, motionless.

"I—" she began.

Quickly he caught her, drew her so close that she seemed to mold into his fluid strength. His lips were upon hers, a whiteness over her eyes. For a moment all the vital force of him surged into her throat like hot wine. Then he had released her, and stepped back, a pallor spreading under his tan.

"I was afraid—" he articulated.

She forced herself to speak. "I think—we had better go back—to the hotel."

In silence they returned to the rickshaws. The air seemed bruised and quivering about her. She did not speak during the entire ride, and when they reached the hotel, she hurried to her room without a word or a glance.

II

When the hour for dinner arrived it found her undecided. She did not know what she would say when she saw him, yet she knew she must see him, and soon. The very thought of being in his presence brought a fear that was ecstasy.

She realized, now he had kissed her, that she had cheated herself with a dream. In playing truant from life, she had become tangled in a reality that made all those years in Saïgon fall away like the cinders of a dead planet. An impulse had swept her out of the circumstances of her former life, and now she had to return—without the delusion of happiness which in the past had made that life seem full. Before, she had been able to believe that in rising above blood and environment she had attained contentment. Now, she knew, she could never be satisfied with Monsieur Chauvet and all that he signified.

She had blundered—tragically.

But she had been so sure of herself! All genuine feeling, together with her susceptibility to deep attach-

ments, seemed to have died with Kim Khouan, and the following years, unmoved by any great disturbance, had given her an emotional poise that was like a rapier ready to fend off complications. She had arrived at her triumph so coolly—the mistress of Monsieur Chauvet dining with the Governor! And then, within a fortnight, the integrity of her defenses was violated. Trembling before a man who had come in utter simplicity, flung into her life by an incident sordid and commonplace. The very image of him, floating before her now, put salt and fire into her blood. And how would it all end?

It was, she recognized, an impossible situation for which there was but one solution. When she was younger, before the details of material existence had become so involved, she could have gone with him—anywhere. But not now. Nor was it left for her to choose. The mode of living that she had created held her with a thousand little impulses and habits, trivial necessities that, no matter how inconsequential, were strong as linked iron. To break them meant breaking something within herself.

Why, she demanded of herself savagely, had not this thing happened years ago? Life, the jealous lover, was taking revenge upon her for having lived without fear.

Trying to analyze her feeling toward Richard Garstin, it resolved into a metaphor: a needle swinging to a pole. It was not the physical being that drew her but a force of which the physical was a tangible expression.

A number of facets made up that physical aspect; his easy strength, the little reddish tinge in his hair, the clouded, half-wistful intensity of his eyes. . . . Beyond these, deep within, was a power; a power that did not necessarily have to do with will or character but that nevertheless turned her heart to quicksilver.

It was the forces that had evolved him, reflected now in the circumstances of his life, which galvanized her decision not to go away with him. He was born to the sea and the sun, filled with echoes of those dynamos of power that rumbled in the groin of his country; and out of that simplicity sprang an unquenchable yearning, desperate but not strong enough to lift him above the elemental qualities to which he was bound temperamentally.

He would always be what he was now.

From across a wide space she touched him, clung momentarily. But almost immediately she would have to relinquish him. She would continue to Vinh, and there turn back. His gift to her would be equally unsatisfactory: a restless passion that would haunt the ashes of her years, never able to rise, phenix-like.

She would not see him tonight, she decided.

Summoning the chauffeur, she instructed him to go to Monsieur Garstin's room and say that, as she was not well, she would dine alone, but they would start early in the morning, as planned.

The room-boy brought her dinner but she did not

touch it. Beyond the windows, Hué pulsed softly under the sifting of night, a dark, colorless gleam on the river, and the lights of the native town swarming among the trees like luminous insects.

A knock on the door quickened her breathing. She knew before she answered who it would be.

A gaze hooded and furtive met hers. His suit clung moistly to his frame, and there was dust about the bottom of his trousers.

"I got your message a moment ago when I came in," he said in a thick voice.

She stepped aside and he moved past her to the window. For a moment he stood there, staring out, fatigue in the droop of his shoulders. When he turned, he seemed pitifully perplexed.

"You know, of course," he faltered, "that I love you."

Those words struck her with almost physical force. No one had ever said that to her in just that way. "Love," as he pronounced it, had no implications.

She remained standing by the door. "You forget my blood." A ridiculous, futile thing to say.

He smiled wearily. "What does that matter?"

"And Monsieur Chauvet. . . ."

"He—he doesn't exist—except as a name."

Standing there by the window, in the dim light, he seemed ringed with a dark radiance. His dusty trousers, the perspiration that sagged in his clothing, all these proofs of his soiled and tired being, were

absorbed in something authentic and immaculate behind his gaze.

"But what about my—my life?" she continued. "You know nothing. . . ."

"I know enough," he said. "That afternoon I saw you at the hotel in Saïgon, I heard some Frenchmen talking. . . ." After a moment he added: "I think you are a drum beating down men's resistance."

He said it so simply that it did not sound astonishing. It was one of those unexpected, fugitive things that now and then darted out of the wistful depths of him.

"I don't think it would matter what you did," he went on. He drew a deep breath. "Will you go away with me—to America?"

She met his eyes evenly, while all her being trembled. "No."

He did not seem surprised. "Why?"

"Because it—it is impossible."

He did not repeat that he loved her; it seemed as if he thought it unnecessary. He merely turned and looked out of the window again. She wanted to move swiftly to his side and burn her lips in the soft rim of fire on his hair.

Presently he said:

"We will get to Vinh tomorrow night." It was not a question. "From there I'll take the train to Hanoi and Hai-Phong." Then he turned. "Perhaps you will change."

She smiled—she felt that it was a remarkably calm smile.

"No, I shan't change."

He hesitated. "Would you rather—turn back here?"

"I am going to Vinh"—quietly.

He ran his fingers through his hair; a gesture of indecision. He looked a little dazed, and utterly exhausted. His smile was heavy.

"We start at five o'clock?"

"Yes."

She opened the door.

"Good night," he said, moving out awkwardly.

After he had gone the room swam dizzily. Was the light growing dimmer? When she understood, it seemed very strange; she had not cried since she was a little girl.

12

The darkness was being ground to powder when they left in the morning. Hué seemed to lie under gray dust that made it haggard and colorless. A wind, drifting across the river, brought the smells of viscid mud flats and sickly-sweet flowers.

The early morning grayness did not subdue Thi-Linh's emotions; they were sharp, and italicized with a cold verity. Garstin's eyes were blood-veined; his suit was faintly odorous of sweaty skin. Life at that moment, to her, was attenuated and ugly.

With the rising of the sun the world became more

normal. It seemed incredible that the man beside her was the one who had come to her room the night before with such amazing humility. He sat there like a tired, travel-stained stranger. The night seemed only to have added to his weariness; he had become leaden, and entirely withdrawn.

At noon they stopped at Dong-hoi. It was a fairly large town, umber-walled and facing a flare of blue sea. It bristled with a military air.

As they rode into the main street she saw a familiar face, red and bearded, that she dimly identified with Saïgon. The man was in a motorcar, and he leaned out and stared as her automobile shot by. Undoubtedly he had recognized her. But it did not matter. Nothing was of much consequence now—except these last few hours. Let the following days take care of themselves.

Leaving Dong-hoi, they crossed a stream on a ferry poled by natives. Beyond there, the coast rose into blue undulations mightier than the mountains between Tourane and Hué. Azure islands, far off in the sunlight, drifted like hazy exhalations of the water. The valleys were sprinkled with infinitesimal figures working the fields. As she watched, Thi-Linh was oppressed by the inexorable necessity of toil. It seemed to rob emotion of every sublime quality, and make it simply the reflex of tired minds and muscles, the animal-like escape from the burden of living.

Purple shadows ripened on the flanks of the moun-

tains, dripping into the valleys and clotting them. A little vein of fire outlined the crests.

Twice that afternoon they had stopped because of motor trouble. The last time the chauffeur made no progress, and Garstin, drawing off his coat, bent under the lifted hood, his hands working expertly with plugs and coils. Perspiration streamed from his flushed face; his shirt molded to his torso. As she watched him, her thoughts seemed to become limpid with his every movement, and she shut her eyes, only to feel a golden burn upon her eyelids that spread and shaped until his vigorous form filled her vision.

Those stops delayed them considerably; now it would be near midnight before they reached Vinh.

Dusk ran quick fingers over the mountains, blending them into the darkness that rushed out of the sea. The road was a Milky Way stretching endlessly before the headlights. Now and then they passed villages, the open doors hot with dusty light. A swarm of hot stars sprawled over the sky.

Garstin had not spoken since the last stop. He was a white shape in the corner of the seat, his ruffled hair waving against the blue night. But the warmth of his presence spread to her and excited her. A few hours—then Vinh. The realization that their time together was so brief relaxed her strength. She wanted to draw close, to whisper that she would go with him—anywhere—anywhere! Frightened, she sat there watching the road slide under the wind-shield.

Lights sprang out of the darkness ahead. Another town. Her mind groped—Ha-Tinh. The gleaming mile-stone beside the road announced the nearness of Vinh.

The car tore into the lighted streets of Ha-Tinh, scattering people and vehicles before it. A rush of yellow doorways, street-lamps, dark houses and figures that ran together in an animated panorama drawn rapidly past. Sounds, smells dwindled; and lights. Again darkness over the white road and spinning mile-stones.

The lights of another car dilated in the gloom ahead. Suddenly a spotlight shot out from its side, waving frantically. Thi-Linh called to the chauffeur to slow down. A moment later the other automobile drew alongside, stopping with a shriek of brakes. From the dimness behind the wind-shield a French voice spoke.

"Are you going to Vinh?"

"Yes," Thi-Linh replied.

"It's absolutely impossible," said the voice. "The road is entirely under water. The floods. Raining for two weeks. Absolutely impossible," the man reiterated.

There was a moment of silence. Finally Thi-Linh asked:

"How did you get through?"

"By boat from Ben-Thuy. You can make it in the morning. Telegraph to the commissaire at Ben-Thuy, and he will send a barge to the village a few kilometers from here. But tonight—absolutely impossible!"

The man accelerated his motor; a roar filled the quiet.

"Thank you," Thi-Linh called.

The car slid forward with a flash of its mud-spattered sides, the sound of its motor rapidly sinking into a purr.

Thi-Linh felt Richard Garstin's gaze upon her. She did not yet know how to accept this unexpected check.

"What are we to do?" the man asked.

"Go back to Ha-Tinh—there is nothing else to do. We can send a telegram from there. I suppose there will be a hotel."

She ordered the chauffeur to turn around. "No French hotel at Ha-Tinh," announced the Annamite briefly. "Only Chinese hotel."

Thi-Linh shrugged. "I am sorry we must turn back," she said to Garstin. But she was not.

"It can't be helped," he returned quietly. "But will this Chinese hotel be fit for you to stay in?"

She smiled.

"You forget I lived in the jungle for years."

13

The Chinese hotel was a hotel in name only. It was on the main street, facing a flare of hot light from the wide doorway of a grocery store owned by the same Chinaman. It was low and whitewashed. The entrance led through a dirty storeroom piled with bits of iron, furniture, and other objects lost in gloom. In one corner stood a broken rickshaw; opposite, was

a narrow stair that turned sharply into a square of pale light. Below the stair was a table, obviously where meals were served, with a torn punkah hanging motionless above it. All this faintly outlined in the light of an oil lamp swung in a ring from the soiled ceiling.

There was an air of age about the place that was like a treacherous essence spilled long ago and soaked into the walls.

Out in the street, the glare from the open shops was harsh and lustful. Sandals clicked the dust from the ground, and a wavering film enclosed the moving figures, some in black Tonkinese dress and others half naked, their bare skins shining.

The air was crowded with heat and smells.

A group of natives collected about the door of the grocery store while Thi-Linh and Garstin made arrangements for rooms and food. Coming out into the street, into the dust and hot sprays of light, Thi-Linh felt that the air was curdled by the presence of so many people.

Garstin smiled wanly as they entered the storeroom that occupied the ground floor of the hotel.

"Do you mind?" he asked.

"It doesn't matter."

A Chinese boy in dirty, flopping trousers, bare of chest and feet, led them up the stair, out upon a veranda that ran past several doors and above a courtyard. The stars were incongruously pure above that courtyard gloom-soaked and heavy with the effluvium of a latrine.

Thi-Linh's room was small, its white walls, taking on the color of the lamplight, seeming coated with yellow dust. The only furniture was a chair and a single bed clouded by a torn, rust-streaked mosquito-net. The one window looked down upon an unlighted road, invisibly astir, that crossed the main street. In the distance she heard Chinese music—ribald and sharp as scraping metal.

Garstin's room was at the end of the veranda.

The place seemed to contract about her; she felt pressed into a lambent shaft of heat, suffocated.

Stepping out upon the veranda, she met Garstin coming from his room. He looked haggard, spent.

"It's dreadful," he breathed with difficulty, "this heat. . . ."

"Like the jungle. . . ."

For a moment she had the illusion that, out in the street where all those people crowded through the dust-ridden light, sinewy flanks were stretching.

"Do you think you can stand it?"

She laughed—the sound seemed quenched in the odorous black heat of the courtyard.

"I think dinner will be ready—if we go down."

She saw him shudder.

The food, although prepared in the French manner and apparently clean, seemed to absorb the sordid atmosphere of that storeroom. A little boy, the punkah-cord wrapped around one toe, worked the flapping fan above their heads. Thi-Linh's thoughts rasped back

and forth as on rusty hinges; she felt that her brain, corroded by the humidity, had gone to mold and in a moment would disintegrate in her skull. She could not swallow the food.

"Let us go outside," she articulated, her lungs laboring with the heat.

Beggars whined about the doorway. On the sidewalks and in the street, figures drifted languidly through the spills of superheated light; forms pale and dark, mingling, shifting, until the dimness reeled like a drunken harlequin. The clacking sandals smote the drone of heavy voices. In the distance, that Chinese music introduced a note of madness. Again she had the feeling that all these people clabbered the air, to which the lights added melting clots, thick with dust and odors.

"It's little better . . ." he murmured.

Curious faces peered at them.

"It seems unreal," she heard herself saying. "It's like being able to step back . . . behind the mind . . . into cells hot and quivering . . . a spillway where all the evil accumulates. . . ." She laughed; it startled her. "Do you think there is such a place . . . at the back of the brain?"

He, too, laughed. . . .

She became obsessed with the thought: Ha-Tinh, a calorific dimension behind the intelligence where desire sprawled and flexed like a tawny cat.

"We're near the sea, aren't we?" he asked.

"Yes. . . ."

"God! Where's the wind?"

The wind, she repeated in her mind. It was somewhere. Involuntarily she looked up at the black sky, sweating with stars, as though expecting to find it there. If the moon was up she could beat on it . . . a gong to summon the wind. But when will the moon be up? she wondered impatiently. Later. An old moon, tawny as Ha-Tinh. A yellow cat of a moon. Perhaps it would come creeping on the wind. . . . But that is silly, she reflected. How could the moon come creeping on the wind?

"Let us go back . . ." she said. "Perhaps the rest, the sleep . . ."

He mopped his forehead.

"Funny," he muttered. "What made you think of that? A spillway behind the mind. . . ."

14

How long had she been in her room? How many hours? Or was it years? That white room turned ocher by the lamp—how she hated it! But she did not dare to go outside.

Several times she had heard Garstin moving about on the veranda, and his footsteps had seemed to walk over her heart. He was in his room now; she had heard him enter and close the door. He was not sleeping. But sitting; walking down centuries as he sat.

Like herself. Why didn't she go to him? Why didn't she go and simply sit there beside him; walk down the centuries with him? But she was afraid—afraid she might not be able to climb back into the present; back to Saïgon, to Monsieur Chauvet, and herself.

The street that ran below the window was quiet now. The night was quiet. Yet it gave her a sense of suppressed drums.

Black heat panted over Ha-Tinh, swelling the flanks of silence. She could feel those flanks rubbing against her. Black flanks of silence that moved to a stealthy purring.

Why was she waiting? You know you want to go to him, she told herself. So why wait? Or, if you must wait, at least lie down. But she continued to sit there, fatigue heavy in her. Perhaps I am waiting for the moon, she thought. She still clung to that absurd illusion that the moon would bring a wind; wind to clear her mind; make it possible for her to go to him and talk calmly. But she could not go now, with those flanks of heat rubbing against her.

What did that heat mean; and the silence, and Ha-Tinh? Although the town was comparatively still, and most of the people sleeping, she had the feeling that the streets were darkly astir. Indo-China prowling in the streets of Ha-Tinh. Asia prowling in the streets of Ha-Tinh. They will be prowling here, she thought dully, when France is gone.

Asia . . . a hermaphrodite . . . half an ancient

sage . . . half a sloe-eyed woman . . . creeping through the streets of Ha-Tinh. Asia . . . a spillway behind the mind of the world . . . where all the evil accumulated, surviving time. But what was evil? Stagnated wisdom—an imaginary sirocco blown through the minds of men? Was evil simply a chain wound around the world's throat by its own frightened fingers? A hallucination?

Half an ancient sage, half a sloe-eyed woman. Because of these mingled traits, masculine and feminine, Asia could go on producing and suckling. Limbs of a man, brain of a man; torso of a woman, drowsy gaze of a woman. Asia: a phallus crowned with wisdom. White blood grown dark upon it. Asia: the death-continent of the races; brown, yellow, white, all celebrating their marriage about the lingam.

Asia. Ha-Tinh. Richard Garstin. Herself. What did they all mean, thrust together, congealed in this night?

Richard Garstin. America—panting with mills, singing its songs of iron, but desperately stirred by an illusion of beauty. America—the death-house of Europe. And Asia—the dark reservoir into which both filtered.

She, Thi-Linh, was the dark reservoir into which men filtered.

All the dusky glory of her seemed to enfold Richard Garstin.

If I have ever lived before, she thought, I have lived

a thousand times, I have been a thousand courtezans, a thousand nuns; giving body, giving soul. Tonight I can feel men within me. Bodies—aching—tired—hot—rigid—cool—relaxed—bodies in starlight—bodies pressed close to earth. I can remember something forgotten, something without lust. I see it for a moment—flickering—far off—can I hold it? Will I understand tomorrow? Something terrifying—yet something that I knew—long ago. Sound—all sound—dew—rain—sand—green things—earth-touch—ether rushing in men's veins—blood rushing in men's veins—muscle—biceps—sinew—tendon—spirit — soul — life—death.

What am I?

A woman sitting in a soiled room in Ha-Tinh. Indo-China sitting in a soiled room in Ha-Tinh.

And how did I come here?

Through long darkness. Justin: an enclosure for the mortal remains. Paul: a pavilion for the memory. And Richard Garstin: a temple for the soul? Behind all three, Kim Khouan, the dark impulse.

I wish the moon would rise. Then I could put out this lamp and take it for my lamp, and go to him. . . . Perhaps it is up now.

Thi-Linh rose and blew out the light. A thin pale gauze seemed to float in through the window. She looked out.

The sky was dark blue; under it the road seemed asleep in an unnatural twilight. Somewhere in that

great cluster of houses someone was singing—the broken notes limped down the silence. A muted click-clack from the main street.

But where was the moon?

She opened the door and emerged upon the veranda.

A pale flush purified the courtyard; it mounted the walls, running past black shadows, and shone dimly on glazed roofs. The moon. And did she feel a wind?

I am a tide, she thought, rising with the moon. It has drawn me up through centuries; and I am cool and limpid. I will lift him with me—up—up—to the moon. He is my sacrifice to the moon. I am a sacrifice to the moon.

She heard a door open at the end of the veranda.

He was beside her. "So hot . . ." she heard him murmur. His face looked swarthy, darkened by the moonlight. But the veins of his wrists stood out in silver.

"I wanted to come to you," he was saying, "but I was afraid. . . ."

Those silver veins were against her now. He had slipped his arm about her, and his face, hovering close, had blotted out the moon.

"The last night. . . ."

As he kissed her, all life seemed to flow into him, through him to that moon.

I give all, she said to herself, all.

"I've been waiting," she sighed, "hoping you would come."

"And I've been waiting to come."

A sharp breath escaped her; he was trembling.

"It's like—like passing through you—to something I can't understand," she said.

"I know—that time I heard a gull cry—and wanted something—something I couldn't touch—"

Suddenly, as he spoke, she felt ancient, and very tired; hidden years seemed to lunge out of her heart, stilling the blood in her veins, and sagging in her body.

"How old did I tell you I was?" she breathed, frightened.

"It doesn't matter. . . ."

A gull crying—its notes piercing her ears, piercing her heart. Strange that a gull can come between us, she thought dully. But it had. With a dark swoop. A thin tremor of anguish wrenched a moan from her.

"Oh, I wish you hadn't said that!"

"Why?"

He was asking why! Couldn't he understand? But men never did. A flash had illuminated that complex fissure in his nature. The same flash had blasted her emotions. It was useless to explain, to try to tell him that he had heard a gull crying beyond her, and if she yielded, that cry would become a lethal blade plunged into the precious thing which had grown between them. . . . Oh, why couldn't men understand? . . . A girl on a beach, below cliffs. . . . She would be like that . . . like all the women he had known. . . . And he

would be gone . . . still haunted by that plaintive wail. . . .

She thrust him away, almost abruptly. But how cool were those silver veins on his wrists! They seemed invisibly joined to hers, and drawing away was like tearing them apart, pouring their lives out upon the floor.

"Early in the morning," she said quickly, "we start. The chauffeur telegraphed—"

He caught her hands but she slipped free again.

"Don't!" she whispered. "Do you want me to be like—like that girl on the beach?"

"But—"

"No, of course you don't understand—"

"—I love—"

"Yes, I know—and that is why—that is why—"

"If you go—"

"I must!"

"I will kill myself—"

She laughed—desperately. "Very well—kill yourself—kill me—but don't kill *that.*"

Swiftly she stepped into the room and closed the door. But she had scarcely closed it before it opened and he came in.

15

She was awakened by a persistent knocking.

Her first impression was of a burst of shrill sunlight

on the floor, and, through the window, the sky savagely blue. A cold remembrance brimmed her mind.

Her body dragged with inertia as she rose. Opening the door a crack, she saw the chauffeur standing outside.

"Car is ready," he announced.

Other remembrances lurched into her awakening brain now. She felt a little sick, dizzy.

"Have you called Monsieur Garstin?"

"He is not in his room. Chinese man said he went out early this morning, asking the way to Vinh."

This announcement did not shock or startle her. Subconsciously, she had known that he would be gone. A feeling almost of relief came into her. But she was impressed with the necessity to get away quickly.

"We will not go to Vinh," she said, "but back to Hué—to Saïgon."

She sat down on the side of the bed. She was tired physically, but curiously, her mind was at ease.

It was over now.

She realized it without regret.

It was, she reflected, immensely satisfying to know that in the future Richard Garstin could not hurt her; he had passed. And she would never allow anyone to come so close to her again. Never. But how could she say that with any degree of certainty? She had said it before, and meant it sincerely. Yet surely life was through with her. She did not need anyone now

. . . ever.' From so much giving she had learned to sustain herself. Yes, she understood so much; and the knowledge was enormously cruel.

It was the end of all to know too much.

I suppose I should feel soiled, she thought, but I am too tired now. . . .

Yes, surely life was through with her. Peace. That was what she wanted. And she thought of Monsieur Chauvet.

16

It was late afternoon, and raining, when the automobile whirred into Saïgon. A nostalgic smell rose from the wet pavements, like an aura of old pain yielded up by something dead and wrapped in musky cloths. It made the city seem overfamiliar to Thi-Linh. Yet she was glad to be back. It was reassuring to be in the midst of old surroundings again, even though they breathed an air of faded anguish.

The house was dark and deserted looking. But as the automobile stopped under the porte-cochère, a light appeared in the hall. She recognized Hoa's form in the doorway.

"It is fortunate for you that you got here tonight," snapped the old woman; but her eyes held an affectionate light. "Your telegram said it might be morning—and in the morning Monsieur Chauvet arrives from Hanoi—by boat."

Questions rose into Thi-Linh's mind, but she put

them aside and said, "Have some tea brought to my room, Hoa; I am very fatigued."

Her room felt cold, and had a musty smell. Unconsciously her gaze searched the floor to see if there were any betel-stains. How familiar to be doing that again!

She put on a dressing-gown. Presently Hoa came with a tray. Cinnamon toast and tea! Something comforting about them.

"Now tell me all about it, Hoa," she directed.

"Five days ago," said Hoa, "Monsieur Chauvet telegraphed that he was returning by boat because of the floods. I sent you a message; you did not get it? When your telegram came yesterday, I did not know where to reach you or I would have told you that you must get here before tomorrow morning." Then she added: "However, it might have taught you a lesson if you had not arrived in time."

Thi-Linh smiled faintly. "It would have been unfortunate for you as well as for me, dear Hoa," she said, and patted the old woman's cheek.

How simple everything would be, she thought, if she were like Hoa!

"The American?" asked the old woman.

A little dull sensation thudded against Thi-Linh's heart; it was not regret, she knew that, it was bitterness.

"He made his boat—I suppose," she replied.

"You left him at Vinh?"

"Yes." . . . Then she smiled at Hoa again. "It's

pleasant to be back—not to have to think—or to plan—but just to live—and drift."

Hoa's eyes were upon her questioningly. Thi-Linh considered her for a moment, divining that look, then spoke, her words unconsciously falling into a mold:

"I am through with all that, Hoa—for always."

Habit led her to dress for dinner. The same smell of mildew that haunted the air upstairs lingered in the dining-room, mingling with a trailing, subtle fragrance from the garden. Moldy—the house was moldy. So was Saïgon, she thought. A city old and yellow, with moist rot about the bases of its houses, making maps of decay upon their walls, dripping under their eaves like stagnant water. Gangrene at the heart of Saïgon, its effluvium mating with the treacherous sweetness of tropical plants and producing an atmosphere of beautiful decay.

Suddenly the thought frightened her.

She went to the mirror in the hall. The light was dim and a gray shadow lay over her features. She wondered if it were a sifting of age. How old was she, twenty-nine? She had not considered her age seriously since that night the Governor came to dinner. She was twenty-nine then. But surely she was years older now. Had only a few weeks passed? That seemed incredible.

Her face looked out from that gray shadow with a fragile luster emphasized by rouged lips. It was the same face which had gazed at her from the mirror that

night a few weeks ago, except that the eyes seemed a little heavier, the lips drawn down at the corners with fatigue. That grayness was only an illusion of the shadow. Or, perhaps, a reflection from her heart. Gray heart, filled with dust; and over it, as over Saïgon, an aura of old pain. But her body—there was no visible change—no mold creeping up from her limbs, making maps of age upon her thighs and breasts, streaming from under her hair in horrible greenish ooze. No, she was still beautiful. Beauty sifted with gray dust; dust of old pain.

She did not return to the table, but sat in the living-room and smoked.

A thought which had come to her that morning in the hotel at Ha-Tinh returned. "I suppose I should feel soiled. . . ." At the time, she remembered, she had been too tired to analyze. She was still tired. But she could think clearly now.

I suppose I should feel soiled, she repeated mentally, but instead I feel . . . purified.

Katharsis. That old word, learned while she was living with Paul, slipped into her mind as a simple explanation. Immorality was a legend, pernicious to those who believe it. . . . This did not seem a dangerous creed. But it was not a creed; it was herself. She had simply heard the constant crying of a gull beyond life—Richard Garstin had given her that figure of speech if nothing else!—and repeatedly she had given herself to life, seeking in that way to translate

an intangible beauty. And the men who were the symbols; each had received something from her. To one she had given a son; to another, a book; to a third, a temporary strength; to a fourth, a certain happiness in his old age; and to the last—ah, a vital thing!

Evil? No, she was not evil; she did not believe in evil. "You have a secret. . . ." Paul had told her. Was that it? But what did that knowledge gain her? A little assurance, perhaps—but this would flicker out with her. Suddenly she was oppressed by the thought of death. A grave: beauty mending a gash in the earth? Merely that? Surely something went on—what was it? The essence of anguish and wisdom distilled into the air by bodies that had suffered, a haunting legacy to future generations whose suffering and knowledge added to it century after century, producing a vapor of ancient awareness that permeated each new consciousness?

Not soiled, purified.

On an impulse, she rose and put out the light. There was a curious intimacy in the darkness. Pale night outlined the windows, and from the dining-room, across the hall, came a diffusion of yellowish light. A tall vase, almost as high as a man, stood in one corner. It seemed to catch all the seepage of light and glow spectrally, outlining a dark phenix upon its rondured body. A phenix. It seemed to explain her calm. She had risen out of the ashes of her heart.

She smoked on, lighting one cigarette from the other.

That vase held her thoughts.

She did not know how long she had been sitting there, immersed in quiet and darkness—the light in the dining-room was out now—when she heard footsteps in the front. Shortly afterward the door-bell rang.

She waited, but the house-boy did not come. "Nham!" she called; then, after a moment, "Hoa!"

The door-bell rang again, followed by a click-clacking on the stairs. Thi-Linh heard Hoa cross the hall. Followed a murmur of voices, then the old woman passed the doorway.

"Here I am, Hoa," she called. "Put on the light."

"It is a boy who wants to see you," said Hoa, pressing the switch. "I forgot to tell you when you came—he was here yesterday, asking for you. I told him you might be back today."

Thi-Linh frowned.

"I don't want to see anyone. Who is he? What is he—Annamite?"

"Yes. He wouldn't say what he wanted, simply that he had a message for you."

For no comprehensible reason, her temples began beating quickly.

"Send him in."

17

The boy who entered was slender, and pale for a native. But that pallor, she saw, was due more to a scarcely discernible coating of powder than actual color. Thi-Linh took in his clothing: a gray Norfolk jacket, full white trousers, and a tie of bright blue. His eyes were dark with an intensity that was disconcerting; black oily hair was plastered down upon his head, a head classically poised and beautiful. Thi-Linh had seen many young boys of his type in the Rue Catinat, but few with such an air of authentic breeding and reserved assurance. He did not seem in the least disturbed, facing a stranger; indeed, he smiled, his large felt hat held easily in one hand.

"I am Justin," he said simply.

But in the fraction of a second before he spoke she knew. The confirmation left her staring at him with a sudden lack of poise, amounting almost to embarrassment, which she hoped he would not see. He took a step forward, then paused. His uncertain movement impressed upon her the necessity to stir, to say something. Quickly she rose, and he crossed the room to meet her, his smile a little shy now.

She kissed him. "Justin," she said.

They stood looking at each other, both smiling reticently. Thi-Linh was not at ease yet. Her son. That

thought bewildered her. What should she do? What should she say?

She gestured toward a chair. "Sit down."

This seemed to relieve the tension a little. She stared at him intently. For some reason that sheen of powder on his face and his clothes so utterly French vaguely alarmed her. Her son—Kim Khouan's son. She tried to grasp the fact. But she was deflected by insignificant details, such as the powder, the Norfolk jacket.

"I am glad you have come," she articulated finally. "When did you arrive?"

"Yesterday morning." Then his gaze darkened, as though reflecting a bruising thought. "I——"

"Why didn't you tell Hoa who you were when you came yesterday?" she interrupted. "You could have stayed here."

He seemed abashed. "I didn't know whether—I——"

"I am sorry," she said. Where *could* he stay? Monsieur Chauvet would be back in the morning, and he could not remain in the house then. But Hoa could keep him with her, in the servants' quarters. Her son in the servants' quarters! Yet, if he was to be near her, that was the only place he could stay.

"How is Mama Thi-Bao?" she asked.

That bruised look came into his eyes again. Suddenly she understood.

"She——"

"She is dead," he said, his eyes filling with tears. "That is why I came. You wrote, you know, sending me the money—so after she died——"

He was apologizing for having come! This wove back and forth across her mind, tangled in the thought that Mama Thi-Bao was dead. An old woman sitting in the rear of a shop, vacant-eyed and chewing betel. The picture seemed to inject a bitter fluid into her veins. The ache that followed was dim, faded, but none the less poignant. It was as if a shadow had suddenly dissipated out of her past, leaving a vague emptiness. She tried vainly to impress upon herself the fact that Mama Thi-Bao no longer existed except as a pathetic memory. It was a relief when she felt her eyes grow moist; at first she was afraid she would not be able to cry.

"So after she died," Justin repeated, "I came to tell you."

"Of course," she murmured.

Again she found herself gazing critically at his powdered face, his French clothes.

"Where did you get that suit?" After she had asked the question, it seemed utterly trivial. Yet she had to say something—she could not sit there thinking about Mama Thi-Bao.

He smiled with a faint hint of pride.

"Monsieur le Commissaire gave it to me—after Ninh-Binh washed it, it was too small for him."

Fear darted at her with his words. France was

touching her son, reaching out for him. And he was an Annamite. Annamite, she repeated in her mind. Only a little French blood . . . from her. But the fact of that blood, no matter how negligible the quantity, caused her a sudden alarm. It was like being forced to regard, for the first time, a weakness he had inherited from her.

"Monsieur le Commissaire," she repeated, trying to remember something. "Ah, yes! He is helping you—you are studying for the *Service Télégrafique.*"

"Yes, Mama Thi-Linh."

It was as though a flicker of light had sprung across her eyes; her vision went white. She wondered, for a moment, if she were blind. But she knew she had only closed her eyes—closed them so he would not see the look in them. Mama Thi-Linh! Had Mama Thi-Bao taught him to call her that?—poor Mama Thi-Bao who was dead! She suffered an excruciating pride of possession, the first she had felt since she held him in her arms years ago. She wanted to draw him to her, to let her hands move hungrily over his face, and to kiss him again and again. But she only stared, her fingers tightening rigidly about the arms of the chair.

Forcing herself to speak, she repeated: "Yes—you are studying for the *Service Télégrafique*—of course. And you must study hard."

He smiled; and it was Kim Khouan smiling at her.

"I do. Already I am nearly as clever as a Frenchman."

His words clashed a warning. Clever as a Frenchman! Desperation seized her. She had been right: any contact with France was fatal. In a little while, perhaps within a year or two, he would be like those smart young men who paraded up and down the Rue Catinat at night; young men powdered and pomaded, disgustingly proud of their French manners and French clothes. Caricatures of her country! French bodies with Annamite hearts. Native simplicity corrupted by European vices. And he must not become like that, he must not! But what could she do to prevent it? She had a little money—no, more than a little. She had not been stupid during those years with Monsieur Chauvet. And she could get more. France was drawing her son into an involved net. How could she outwit it? Not by telling him he must remain Annamite—not by sending him back to Stung-Treng. But how?

"You like studying for the telegraph?" she asked tentatively.

He hesitated. "Yes. . . . But—"

She felt a surge of hope. "But what?"

"But I would rather go to school. I like books, poetry."

Books, poetry! Kim Khouan talking now. "Thi-Linh, I am a harpstring shivering at your touch. . . ." An echo vibrating out of her youth; it made a ghost of sweet singing in her ears.

"Perhaps," she began, groping vainly; "perhaps——" She paused. Suddenly it had come to her. Send him to school in France! Send him into the very heart of France! Let him absorb the authentic technique of these white men; their manners, even their thoughts! Was not that her best weapon against France? Knowledge against knowledge. But suppose—— Her plan sagged under a ponderous fear. Still she would have to take that hazard. An experiment. Not the cheap imitation of French civilization picked up in Indo-China from tropic-tired colonials, but the genuine erudition of a scholarly nation. A sound French education—and an Annamite heart. What would the result be? It was worth it—it was worth it. And it was less dangerous, for if he remained in Indo-China undoubtedly he would take on the veneer of sophistication that was moral death to a native.

A great joy rose in her. She looked at her son through tears.

"It may be possible," she began, her voice tremulous, "for you to go to school in France."

Slow wonder transfigured his face. He tried to suppress his feeling, but it brimmed over.

"France! Oh, Mama Thi-Linh!"

He sprang up and kissed her—on the mouth. The pounding in her temples mounted fiercely. As the blood subsided she heard a muffled crunching outside. It resolved into the sound of wheels rolling over the

graveled driveway. For an instant she sat there, vaguely apprehensive, then she moved to the window and looked out.

A flare of light was spreading under the porte-cochère, flung by advancing headlights. She saw the machine draw up. A strange car. A taxicab. Monsieur Chauvet. But how had he come ahead of time?

Swiftly she turned to Justin.

"Go in the dining-room—at once—and wait," she directed. "No! Go outside—in the rear—through the dining-room! Wait there. I will send Hoa out as soon as I can. Quickly!"

Without a word he went, crossing the hall and vanishing in the darkness of the dining-room.

She drew a deep breath and composed herself to meet Monsieur Chauvet.

18

She met him in the hallway. Instead of hurrying to him and kissing him, she stood just inside the door and waited for him to approach her.

"I'm sorry," she began. "I would have met you with the car, but the telegram said——"

"We caught the tide," he broke in.

His voice was abrupt, tired. He bent and kissed her stiffly. For an instant she thought he was angry, then she decided it was fatigue. He was very pale, his eyes blood-suffused, and when she tried to look at

him directly, he evaded her gaze. She sensed something furtive and repressed in his manner. Perhaps he had been ill. Fever. He looked feverish; those red veins in his eyes, his blanched, haggard face.

"Haven't you been well?" she asked.

He laughed; it seemed to clot in his throat. He appeared incredibly old, so old that it frightened her. Then a suspicion increased her fear.

"Well enough," he responded.

He dropped his hat on the table—usually he hung it up with meticulous care—and moved into the living-room. The air was thick with the stale odor of smoke. He sniffed.

"Cigarettes? Who has been smoking?"

As she followed him in, he turned with an accusing look.

"I have, of course," she said easily.

"No one has been here?"

She forced a smile. "No one."

As he sat down, she had the illusion that he collapsed in the chair—he seemed to droop and fill it pathetically. Linking his white fingers together, he gazed at her with a deliberate smile that was mask-like in its utter insincerity.

"Where's the man who went up the coast with you?"

After he spoke she realized that he had calculated to startle her. He had startled her, but she knew her expression did not change. The only change was within. Her face had become like parchment; behind

it the blood spurted hotly. She waited a moment before she spoke, and he seized the pause. He was trembling now.

"I thought you were wise," he said in a thick voice, "but you are not. My God! Right under the noses of everybody! Didn't you know you would be seen? That I would be told sooner or later?" He raised his thin-veined, transparent hands violently and dropped them, a flushed spot glowing on either cheek, like absurd smears of rouge. "Mullanax saw you at Donghoi—he got on the boat at Tourane. He also saw the man in the car. . . . Well?"

His gesture and his words seemed cut into her consciousness with the precision of an etching. She felt that she should be extremely emotional, at least palpably disturbed. Instead she was faintly sick. She detested scenes.

"Well?" he demanded, rising. "I suppose you deny it?"

Suddenly the room became enormously overcrowded with furniture; she wanted to push pieces aside, relieve the feeling of cluttered surroundings that pressed upon her. She was acutely aware of too many objects . . . the draperies in the windows, the chairs, the table, the bookcase, the gleaming vase with the phenix on it. . . . Phenix. Could she rise above the nauseating melodrama of this scene?

"No—I do not deny it."

Her disciplined voice surprised her. But evidently

it was more surprising to Monsieur Chauvet. Those two red spots vanished. For an instant she thought he would crumble before her eyes, drop into a pile of disintegrated bones and dry flesh. Then the pallor withdrew from his face, yielding to a creeping flush that rose as if red wine were being poured behind that thin skin; hot wine that was swelling, swelling. She saw him gasp. He looked positively ridiculous.

She had seen a caricature in *La Vie Parisienne* that resembled him, and she remembered it now: idiotically red face behind a white beard that looked false. The man in the cartoon was slightly bent, holding his paunch, and staring in senile rage at a delicately stockinged leg that had kicked him.

Monsieur Chauvet had fallen into that same attitude. How preposterous! She had kicked him in the paunch, and now his face, inflamed behind a false beard, was almost bursting with blood. The absurdity of the thought made her laugh hysterically.

Suddenly something leaped stinging across her eyes.

"Whore!"

The room lurched, drunk with the pain that stunned her. As it became steady, she slowly grasped the fact that he had struck her. . . . That red-faced, false-whiskered man of the cartoon . . . struck her across the eyes . . . called her a whore . . . simply because she had kicked him in the paunch.

The room was suffocating, and spotted with vanishing throbs of vertigo. She had to have air. . . . Now

she was at the window, clinging to the draperies and drawing in the cool night. She smelled flowers; the garden . . . camelias, hyacinth, jasmine. . . . And behind her an old man nursing his paunch. . . . Again an hysterical laugh broke from her. But she mustn't laugh, she mustn't. He would go from anger into fury. And he might strike her across the eyes again . . . with that pathetic, thin-veined hand.

She heard a choking sound. He was strangling . . . strangling from all that blood in his face. She must go to him . . . he was so old . . . he might burst . . . clot the floor with his blood. . . . But it was too thin to clot. . . .

Suddenly there came a shattering thud; as though someone outside had thrown a huge stone through one of the windows, a stone wrapped in cloth, that struck the floor with a muted impact and then split into little pieces.

She swung about, still gripping the drapery.

Stone . . . where was the stone? . . . No stone . . . only Monsieur Chauvet . . . lying in the corner . . . the corner where that phenix-vase had stood . . . gleaming pieces of porcelain scattered about him . . . porcelain that caught the light and glittered cruelly.

Something in her vision seemed to snap, like the released shutter of a camera, and for one staring second her gaze focused a livid clarity upon the entire room. Foremost in the picture was Justin. . . . Justin standing near the doorway. . . . Justin, hatless and dishev-

eled, staring down at the huddle of Monsieur Chauvet. . . . Then the brutal lucidity of that scene blinded her.

"Mama Thi-Linh," she heard his voice saying, "I didn't mean . . . I heard you quarreling. . . . He called you . . . and when I came in . . . caught my collar . . . and I pushed . . . pushed . . ."

She saw, thrown upon her eyelids, a pigmy reflex of what had happened. Again the room lurched. When she opened her eyes, it had settled down.

Unsteadily, she crossed the floor and bent over Monsieur Chauvet, lying in the glitter of the broken vase. Where was the phenix, she wondered dizzily. Under Monsieur Chauvet? Or soaring above him and the shattered vase . . . mounting swiftly out of the ashes of Monsieur Chauvet . . . the cold deadness of Monsieur Chauvet?

She got up, meeting Justin's dark eyes. Their pupils were luminous with fear. In their depths she saw the flash of something else. For a moment it seemed to sever her reason. France was defeating her. . . . France who punishes murder with the guillotine.

"I must be calm," she whispered to herself; "I must be calm!"

"Mama Thi-Linh . . ."

She put her hand over his lips. The warm touch gave her strength. It also impressed upon her the urgency of quick action. Evidently none of the servants had heard or they would have appeared. Perhaps they had all gone to their quarters.

She caught Justin's shoulders.

"Where have you been staying?"

"At a hotel on the Rue Pellerin."

"Go there immediately," she directed, "and wait until you hear from me."

The boy hesitated, his frightened eyes questioning her. She pushed him toward the hall.

"Go—the front door—I will attend to everything."

His look lingered upon the body lying in the midst of broken pottery.

"Is he . . . ?"

"Yes. . . ."

As he started off she drew him back and kissed him fiercely; then she held him a moment, looking into his eyes. Those eyes reassured her. In the little flecks of light deep in the pupils she read a message of hope. . . . Her dark blood pouring back into Indo-China through Justin, the son of Kim Khouan . . . pouring back, filtered through French ideas. . . . The dark blood of other women pouring back into Indo-China through the same sieve . . . torrents of blood swelling the anemic veins of Indo-China . . . taking life in the veins of millions of unborn. . . . All this tumult of blood rising in mighty fountains, turned gold by the sunlight . . . the tawny triumph of Asia. . . . She was, suddenly, no longer afraid.

"Hurry," she said briefly.

Quietly he slipped out of the room.

The End: Portrait of Another Frenchman

MONSIEUR THE PREFECT OF POLICE sat in his office and regarded the pile of papers on his desk with visible annoyance.

Outside, the Rue Catinat lay stunned under the morning sun, breathing up shimmers of heat that drifted into the Commissariat of Police. From where he sat in humid shadow, Monsieur the Prefect could look into the street, seen between the leaves hanging motionless against the half-lowered blinds. No one was afoot at this hour, and only a few rickshaws moved over the hot pavement. Monsieur the Prefect decided that, at that moment, the Rue Catinat was profoundly depressing.

Nor did the pile of papers on his desk offer a more engaging prospect. Routine work. As if he did not have enough to do this morning! Well, at least, he reflected, the matter first on the docket was of a nature sufficiently extraordinary to make up for the dulness of those reports.

The heat gathered about him with oppressive, moist intimacy. He glanced at the motionless electric fan.

Damn that fan! he thought. Who had broken it? One of the natives undoubtedly. They tampered with everything—exactly like monkeys. In fact, they were monkeys. He glanced up as an orderly entered, half expecting to see him dragging a tail across the floor.

"Planton!" he called sharply.

"Oui, monsieur!"

"Who broke this fan?"

"I do not know, monsieur."

Monsieur the Prefect fixed an accusing gaze upon him, then said:

"Tell Monsieur Marceau to come here."

In a moment Monsieur Marceau appeared, looking at his superior with polite interrogation.

"Marceau," said Monsieur the Prefect, "who has been meddling with this fan?"

Monsieur Marceau smiled charmingly. "I do not know, monsieur." After a pause he added: "However, I tried to turn it on this morning before you came, and it started, then, pluff! with a little purple light, it stopped." Monsieur Marceau illustrated his explanation with a gesture.

This news provoked Monsieur the Prefect. "You will see that it is fixed immediately," he commanded.

"Yes, Monsieur le Préfet."

As Monsieur Marceau went out, Monsieur the Prefect again contemplated the pile of papers on his desk, and with the same distaste as before. Damn these papers! Also damn the heat and the fan! Then a

thought wandered across his mind, and he paused to study it.

It was something of a dream, this thought. A dream that he had nursed for a number of years, indeed, since he had come out to this accursed land of exile. This dream was a secret dimension of the future into which he peeped now and then and saw himself, suavely dressed, with a flower in his lapel, descending the steps of the Governor's palace. No longer Monsieur the Prefect, he thought, immensely pleased, but Monsieur the Governor.

In that moment he forgot the heat and the fan and the pile of papers on his desk.

But to his enormous disgust he was abruptly brought back to contemplating them as a door opened and one of the clerks, an Annamite solemn and spectacled, insinuated himself into the office.

"Are you ready for me, Monsieur le Préfet?" he asked.

"I am," said Monsieur the Prefect vehemently.

Quickly he scrawled his name across the bottom of the first of the pile of papers, then the clerk, standing deferentially at one side, stamped it with a seal. Monsieur the Prefect sighed audibly. My God! he thought.

The pile of papers had been divided into two almost equal parts when a knock sounded on the door from the outer office.

"Enter!" called Monsieur the Prefect.

An orderly stepped from behind the opened door.

"Monsieur Gaulard is here, monsieur," he announced.

"Ah! Bring him in. But wait! Is the prisoner with him?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Good."

Monsieur the Prefect waved the clerk out and sat waiting, impatiently thumping the desk.

Presently the door swung wide. First came a woman, then Monsieur Gaulard. As Monsieur the Prefect met Thi-Linh's eyes he smiled. He did not speak.

"Good morning," said Monsieur Gaulard.

"Good morning," said Monsieur the Prefect. He motioned Thi-Linh to a chair. "Sit down."

He observed that she was remarkably composed; also he realized that he found it immensely gratifying to look at her. She had not, he noticed with a mental smile, forgotten to rouge her lips. Her dress was soft and gray, accentuating the golden tint of her skin. How old was she? Twenty-five—twenty-six? But he could not judge. She had enough French blood to keep her from aging quickly, like native women. My God! he mused, but she is calm! Not a flicker of the eye—and dressed as though she were merely going for a morning drive! He discovered he was admiring her. But, he reflected, she would be like this; he had remarked her poise that night at Monsieur Chauvet's house. Poor Chauvet! Senile fool! But this was a

serious matter. I must be very official, he charged himself.

"This is most unfortunate," he began.

Monsieur Gaulard looked very excited.

"She has made it most difficult!" he burst out. "She has refused to talk with anyone but you! My God—"

Monsieur the Prefect interrupted him with an admonishing lift of the hand.

"Let us be calm, my dear Gaulard," he said.

He thought Thi-Linh smiled, and he regarded her severely.

"Is it so," he commenced, "that you have refused to say anything until you talked with me?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Préfet."

"Why?"

She smiled—distantly. "A whim, perhaps."

A whim! It was profoundly disconcerting. He returned her smile ironically; when he spoke his voice was delicately caustic.

"My dear madame, do you realize you are under arrest?"

"Absolutely."

She pronounced the word with a placidity that would have been exceedingly annoying if he had not been, at that moment, appraising the little flecks of gold the intruding sunlight found in her eyes.

"Hmm," he mused.

"May I talk with you alone? I will tell you everything—then."

He entertained the suspicion that there was something like a demand in her tone; then he thrust it aside and decided:

"Very well—if you wish. Monsieur Gaulard? . . ."

"Well, madame?"—when they were alone.

She met his eyes without flinching.

"I killed Monsieur Chauvet," she announced quietly.

That confession struck Monsieur the Prefect as being a bit brutal. Of course he had suspected she had killed him, but—well, he did not expect her to admit it without pressure. It was somewhat upsetting. Now he could bring none of his ingenuity into play.

"Hmm," he mused again. Then: "Do you know the penalty—if convicted?"

"Yes." No fear in her tone.

For a moment he could think of nothing else to utter but "Hmm," which, he realized, sounded quite idiotic.

"The circumstances?" he demanded, after a pause.

Calmly she recited her story. Monsieur Chauvet had returned from Hanoi the previous night, and immediately upon entering the house, accused her of being unfaithful to him in his absence.

"You know how jealous he was; or do you?" she interpolated.

Monsieur the Prefect nodded.

They had quarreled, she continued. He called her a most insulting name; he struck her; and . . . she pushed him into a huge vase in the corner; when he

fell, he must have fractured his skull. In addition to that, the broken pieces of the vase cut the back of his neck very badly.

"That is all," she finished. "I did not mean to kill him—it is most—distressing."

Tears in her eyes? he wondered; or a blur of horror reflected by the memory of that scene?

"Distressing, indeed," he echoed.

He settled back in the chair, arms crossed over his chest, and gazed at her intently. It was one of his favorite poses; it made him look impassive and severe, he thought. Her story corroborated the evidence. Fractured skull. Cuts on the neck. These thoughts swam in the hot cylinder of his brain. Damn this heat! It made the mind run like fluid. A sudden languor possessed him. Her ivory pallor floated before him, magically cool.

"Most distressing," he repeated.

The sound of his voice awakened him to the urgency of some action on his part. He jerked himself up. Hands clasped behind him, he paced the floor. Name of God! Why had this—this mess happened? Of course the court might be lenient with her, but—her reputation was none too good. How many men? A journalist, an officer, and Monsieur Chauvet. Others that he did not know of? And where did she come from? Stung-Treng? Sambor? He would have to look it up. A wench. But she did have amazing poise and dignity. And brains. Altogether an extraordinary hussy. Yet, he faltered, was she a hussy? No, not

entirely. She was difficult to classify. Women of her temperament were strumpets only when they had no brains; but, if intelligent, they were the consorts of men of power. He remembered a yellow sedan-chair he had once seen swinging along the streets of Peking.

He resumed his seat behind the desk. Once more that languor came over him, and the hot cylinder of his mind seemed to revolve around her pallor. Consorts of men of power. . . . For a moment Monsieur the Prefect was bewildered by the thought that had spread stealthily in his brain. But Monsieur the Prefect was not a man to remain bewildered long. The decision with which he folded his hands on the desk seemed to put that thought into action.

"As I said before," he began, "you, of course, realize the consequences."

She nodded.

"You are not frightened?" he pursued.

"No." And she smiled faintly. In that smile was a brief glimpse of weariness, hitherto concealed.

He drew a deep breath.

"Of course," he said, "there is a possibility"—and now he smiled—"there is a possibility it might be proved that—well, that he slipped and fell."

A long silence followed, then:

"Yes," she repeated quietly, "it might be proved that he slipped and fell."

For some time she sat there, her dark gaze unwavering. Then she rose and went to the window. As she stood there in the sunlight, her frail chiffon seemed to

go misty and radiant. Her eyes were veiled, contemplative. What does that expression mean? he wondered. Triumph? Defeat? Exultation? Despair? He could not read the answer in her face when she turned and moved back to the desk; she merely looked tired, and a little dazed.

"You know," she said, "that I have a son?"

He was surprised. But he did not show it. "Yes," he lied; for he believed in keeping up the tradition that a Prefect of Police knows everything.

"And that his father was an Annamite?"

This additional news was a bit distressing, but he nodded impassively. She sighed almost inaudibly.

"I am going to send him to school in France," she announced.

He became quite jovial. "Excellent! He will become French, like his mother, eh?"

She, too, smiled—wearily.

"Yes, he will become French," she said.

Monsieur the Prefect tapped a bell. "Monsieur Gaulard," he told the orderly it summoned.

Monsieur Gaulard came, gazing inquisitively at Monsieur the Prefect. Monsieur the Prefect appeared in extraordinary good spirits.

"It will not be necessary to detain madame," he said. "She has explained satisfactorily."

THE END

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